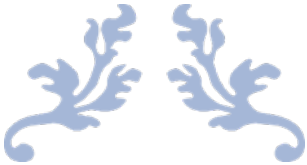

PARADE

[COLLECTED HISTORIES BY LONNIE EDWARDS I, II, & III]

HADDOX COUNTRY MEMORIAL LIBRARY SPECIAL ARCHIVES

A novel by [[redacted]]

Parade is a work of fiction.

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1

The Lying Contest

An Account by The Author Regarding The Events at The 181st Annual Old Timers Day Parade

A Novella

by

Lonnie Edwards, III

[SA 9-11/9-4]

HL.SA.09132.A

That Smell, I:
In Medias Res

Of all the times and places we could pick to begin a decent back-story—which takes place way, way in the future from the story proper—here and now is as good as any. Rodger Preston had just about finished his careful dusting of the pink plastic hydrangeas at the head of the Alzheimer's Hall and was pushing his squeaking supply cart toward the storage closet when all at once he perked up and stopped just shy of room 205, Mrs. Wilmoth's.

Smoke, he thought. *There's a tinge of smoke in the typically sterilized nursing home air. Something's not right. I can't quit my rounds yet, not until I find the source of that smell.*

A quick but thorough check of 205 revealed nothing but a snoring Mrs. Wilmoth. So, Rodger moved on to the next. The room of Lady Ann Fowler.

"Not now Rodger you twit! Sidwell is about to bash Corky over the noggin with a rubber mallet."

"Well what you twit? Spit it out before I punch you before the punch line. You twit, you."

"Well… I, I, I smelled smoke out in the hall, and…"

"Have you no shame Rodger? You, you, you twit! You know I give up that habit weeks ago. Look. Look here. You see that? You see? You know what that is? Huh, Rodger? You know what that is? That's a nicotine patch is what that is. You twit. You ought to know that. I give up cigars weeks ago… twit."

"Uh-huh, yes ma'am— you sure did. And a congratulations on that too, Mrs. Fowler. It must've been real hard on you after all them years and all… But…"

"But what!? I done told you."

"It wasn't cigar smoke I smelled. More like paper and glue… or God forbid, skin. I was just making sure—"

"Well make sure somewhere else. Room 206 is clear as a mountain meadow."

"Yes ma'am, yes ma'am. Enjoy your show ma'am."

"You twit. Check cross the hall. That Edwards is probably up to something. Crazy old bat. Probably let one of them candles burn plumb down to his desk. We ain't even supposed to have them here, but I know good and well I seen flickers coming from his room a few nights back. Him up working on one of his silly stories about that movie or book or whatever it was he swears his daddy or

granddaddy one made here years ago. Swore he darn near made the whole town famous. That man, I tell you… he's up all night some nights, talking in all kinds of different voices to his-self. They ought to give him his own hall and give the rest of us some peace. You ask anybody on this hall, they tell you. That Edwards is the craziest man in the history of New South Oakton. Now get on will ya. No smoke here. Don Sidwell is about to make that Corky snort earthworms up his nose before he lights a sparkler under the seat of his Birddogs™."

Mrs. Fowler's voice trailed off into an old smoker's hack just as Rodger, the afternoon 2nd shift weekend orderly, politely backed out of room 206 and repositioned himself behind his squeaky cart.

You know, he thought hard, rubbing his two-day bearded chin, *Mr. Edwards has been acting a little… well, a little more peculiar than usual lately.*'

Rodger started toward room 207 across the hall when reverie caught him by surprise. Snuck right up on him and he froze mid-hall and relived the first day he met Lonnie Edwards III, the son of Lonnie Edwards II, the son of Lonnie Edwards, the now half-famous local historian that lived in the area years and years ago. Of course he's long since passed on now. Well, they both are, I & II.

II. Rodger & LDE, III

"HERE, MR. EDWARDS? What'ya working on?"

"This oh this it's uh it's just some of Daddy's daddy's old things. Keepsakes, you know stuff he wanted to be passed on to to uh, to uh."

"To his kids and grandkids?"

"Exactly. His kids and grandkids, and uh and uh…"

"His great grandkids?"

"Right. Right, except… I never…"

"Oh, I see. Well, if it's all the same I ain't got none either. No woman will have me I suppose. Anyhow, how you like it here so far?"

"Well, them plastic flowers sure are pretty. Make a person feel like they're out in nature and, you know, back home on the mountain."

"Well, thank you for noticing. I'm Preston. Rodger Preston. I tend to the permanent botanicals around here.

"Oh…"

Lonnie kept rummaging through his box and not paying Rodger much attention. But Rodger is a talker, so…

"Say, you're from the mountain, huh? My folks grew up on the mountain, too. 2055 Little Brotherton Mountain Lane. Little homestead right outside the city limits. Matter of fact, right after they moved the Oakton limits out that way, ours became the first place just over the line on the left, right before the road turns to chirt and bends right and up toward Big Brotherton. What about yours? Where they from?"

"Well, we ain't originally from here." Lonnie said without looking up.

"Is that right? Well, where are you from?"

Great, Lonnie thought. *Looks like Preston— Rodger Preston— is a talker.*

"Well," he huffed a bit to sort of let on that he didn't really want to talk but would. "Well. Great granddaddy (Dale Edwards) was from here, but he moved away after the War, or the Conflict I should say."

"Vietnam?"

"Yes. Vietnam."

"Rough War."

"Well. So, Granddaddy come back on accident. Work sent him here."

"What did he do?"

"Well." Huffing again. "Listen. He was an ad writer

for a big company out west. He liked it enough to stay after just a few trips. Matter of fact, he quit his job to be down here permanently. He used to tell me the heavy air kept him from leaving. Really, it was Mawmaw. One year after the spring parade they have here in River Grove he met my Mawmaw after she won the title of fairest gal in The Grove. She was the niece of a man from a River Grove family Granddaddy had been writing web infomercial travel ads for. Granddaddy was what they called then a webnographer. He worked specifically in the oral tradition translated for the web."

"Is that right, Mr. Edwards?"

"Yeah, else I wouldn't say it. Of course, it's right. Anyway. He'd been collecting oral histories of the township and its people for years by the time my daddy was born. Lord, he had enough material for ten books by the time Daddy could walk, Daddy said. And that's about all of it," he finished and got back into piddling in his keepsakes box.

"Did he ever teach over at the community college? Seems like my folks used to talk about a man that sounds a lot like your great granddaddy."

"Naw. Great Granddaddy died young."

"Oh," Rodger continued his routine maintenance duties. Trash bags. Bed linens. Housekeeping stuff. Etc. "I meant Granddaddy. Your Granddaddy. Reckon, why

not?"

"Oh, for goodness sakes, Rodger," Lonnie shuffled a stack of old photos into the box and hastily closed it and sat it aside. "I guess you're going to worry me to death over this. Cause Granddaddy never did much of anything I don't think. He messed around town and talked to people. He was the unofficial documentarian of River Grove. Important work. Started out writing obits for the The Herald."

"Is that right"?

"Well, I said it; didn't I? Yes, that's right. Every now and then he'd do an odd job here and there so Daddy and Mawaw'd have a roof over their heads, a bed to sleep in, and food in their mouths. Long as they were taken care of, Daddy said Granddaddy seemed to be happy to just work on his collection of River Grove histories."

"That must've been tough on your daddy and your grandmother, having to live on such a meager living and all. Where is River Grove exactly?"

"Alright, Rodger. Just sit on down. I reckon you're going to pester me until the cows come home or I talk myself blue in the face one."

"Alrighty. Yeah."

"They lived right off Main Street there, right in the middle of town. Course that was after Daddy'd done grew up a bit. When he was born, they were living up on Big

Brotherton Mountain in the old McAlister homestead.

"S'at righ'..."

"If you and yours are from here, then you know what set of McAlisters I'm a'talking about. See, my Mawmaw was kin through marriage to the McArtry family and the McAlister family both. Two of the larger families in town at the time. When Old Man Daniel McAlister, the paint shop owner, finally passed on, he left the place to his Aunt Alice's boy Elmer, Elmer Sage, the big millionaire. 'Course he wasn't quite a millionaire at the time Danny and him met. It wasn't until Elmer run a chain of convenient stores that he bought off Mark and Rita Sensing when Mark got too senile to run the business and ended up selling so dirt cheap that Elmer got to build his fortune even bigger than it already was going to be. If that makes sense to you, listen up. I heard all these stories a million times when I was young...

"Right after they moved up to the homestead, Elmer made more money than he could burn from his first patent, a small glass tube designed to hold miniature silk roses like the ones you see at the counter of gas stations and truck stops. Truckers use em as pipes to stay awake on that meth and freebase, which is bad news. But they made Mr. Sage rich so I don't reckon it bothered him too much…

"So, he couldn't see much reason anymore for charg-

ing my folks any rent to stay up on the homestead on Big Brotherton. He only asked one thing of Granddaddy. Elmer wanted his story told in one of his histories of The Grove. Granddaddy obliged. After Mawmaw and Granddaddy married in the little chapel on Haddox Square, they moved right in. And not long after that Granddaddy got started on Elmer's story. It wasn't hard to tell that story he said, he'd been hearing about Elmer Sage since the first time he came to River Grove on a work-related trip…"

Lonnie kept on so Rodger might get bored and move on.

"See, Elmer had a bit of a reputation for meanness and rebellion when he was young. But he had a hard time coming up. His daddy died the day he was born. And when he was a teenager, he witnessed a relative of his get hit by a car and killed in the middle of the parade on Main Street. That had a profound effect on his life, Granddaddy said. Granddaddy tried to write the history of the man killed, too. Merel Gene McAlister. But those stories are neither here nor there. That was a sore spot in Granddaddy's life, Daddy said. He never talked about it like he did the rest of them…

"Like I was saying, Mawmaw and Granddaddy lived up on the homestead for a piece of time, until Daddy was about ten or so. Then they moved into town, right off

Main Street. The mountain was too far a commute for Granddaddy to make every day to collect his histories. So once again, being the good man he was, Elmer let him and Mawmaw and Daddy move into his momma's old place just a few blocks off Haddox Square, in downtown River Grove…

"See, Mawmaw was distantly kin through marriage to Alice Sage, so it was like they were living in an old family heirloom. I remember staying in that house when I was real young. Mawmaw was real happy about that, and of course Granddaddy was happy as a lark. With all that time saved from moving to town, he had more time to collect more history. And out of respect of Elmer, he wrote the history of his folks, too. And I ain't sure if you're being funny or what but River Grove is right here. We almost dead center of town as we speak."

"Well, Mr. Edwards, if I ain't mistaken Elmer Sage was from New South Oakton. At least that's what his memorial over on Cardinal Street says. You knew Elmer Sage? That'd have to make you like over a hundred or something, Mr. Edwards."

"Yes'sir." Mr. Edwards said. "Close to it."

"THE Elmer Sage? Not some other Elmer Sage?"

"That's right. THE Elmer Sage. Real tight they was, Daddy said. But he ain't been gone for quite as long as you seem to think he has. It probably weren't but a year

or so ago that Elmer, Jr passed."

"You mean Mr. Elmer, Sr? Or Elmer, Jr? Ol Elmer "Quick-Stop-&-Glass-Rose-Heir" Sage, Jr. The son of man who pioneered pay-at-the-pump gas stations and the spot-free-car-wash-with-purchase-of-ten-gallons-or-more deal. Ol Elmer "Home-Made-Baked-Miniature-Pecan-Pies-by-The-Dozen?" Sage, Jr. Son of THE man. THE THE Elmer Sage. The man responsible for putting the New South Oakton School District in the top ten in the country."

"Uh-huh. That one."

"The Elmer Sage that has a bronze statue of himself outside the Board of Education building and his face on the front of every Quick Stop in the lower forty eight?"

"Same one," Lonnie snipped, thinking maybe Preston, Rodger Preston, ought to be on this hall instead of him.

"You mean the man who…" Rodger nearly got carried away before Lonnie finally cut him off.

"Yes, boy! Good Lord get a hold on yourself. Daddy knew him too. And like I said, Granddaddy wrote all about him. What's the big deal here? You wise crackin? Elmer was from River Grove. He weren't from no South Oakton. New or Old. That ain't even a place on parade day, Rodger."

"Well, I don't believe Mr. Sage was from River Green, or wherever it was that you said.

"Grove. River Grove." Lonnie would've swore he was sitting there in his Harvard dorm room with Ol Shreve McCannon going on and on about how God ever even let the Southerners live at all after listening to Rodger carry on.

"Yeah. River Grove. Never heard of it. Everywhere else I have though."

And Rodger should've known better than to dispute anything these people on this hall say. He knew good and well that he was on the Alzheimer's Hall. Patients on this hall tend to confuse easy.

"Well… be what it may, Mr. Edwards. I'm afraid you or your daddy and your granddad are mistaken. This here, the place you're in, it's called The New South Oakton. Always has been and always will be."

"Not in this story, Rodger boy."

A Screaming Down the Hall

"RODGER. RODGER– RODGER!" A Screaming comes up the hall.

The reverie left him. He was back mid-hall, though he'd never left. That was many years ago. The first day he met Lonnie Edwards III. Not much has changed here during those years. Mr. Edwards is still in room 207, where Rodger is headed now. He, Lonnie, still talks about his granddaddy's histories.

He still gets paranoid over the littlest changes, like when Meatloaf Friday suddenly became Meatloaf Wednesday and Chicken Fried Steak Tuesday became Friday's special, Chicken Fried Friday. And yes; he still thinks River Grove is a real place. He hints sometimes that he thinks maybe the Rapture has done come and that the 200 Hall (Alzheimer's Hall) is some sort of Purgatory he and the rest are all stuck waiting on Jesus in. He swears this place is the Olive Branch Assisted Living Facility. He jokes sometimes that maybe Nurse Cochren is the one

you gotta pay to get ferried on through to the inferno and then on to a Sweet Chariot in the sky. *Swing Low… Sweet Chariot…*

"RODGER!" Nurse Cochren screams again.

"Yes ma'…"

"Wake up. You smell that smell?" Head Nurse Cochren asked him. And it took him a moment to remember what it was he was originally doing.

"Oh yes, yes ma'am. That's right. I was just about to continue my investigation. I was just standing in the hall to see if I couldn't get a better whiff of it and narrow my search down."

"Smells like smoke to me, Roge."

"Oh yeah. Def. Or something like smoke."

"What's like smoke that isn't smoke, Rodger?"

"Uhhhh— yeah I don't— something probably."

"Have you been hitting the Helium balloons in Rec Hall again?"

Rodger chuckles to himself because he did do that once or twice back in his day. But not anymore. Not usually.

"No way, Head Nurse Cochren. I already checked Mrs. Wilmoth's and Mrs. Fowler's rooms."

"And?"

"Wilmouth is sleeping or— I don't know. Fowler's watching her stories."

"Get on with it. Smells like smoke to me."

"Right. Or something like it. I'm headed to 207 now. Mr. Edwards. See if I can't get to the bottom of this ASAP, Head Nurse Cochren."

"Well get on with it already. Quit staring off into the middle of the hall for chrissakes. Thousand-yard stare. This place libel to burn to the ground. Then where would we be?"

"Um— outside?"

"With dementias out roaming the streets on parade day with second and third-degree burns. Backless gowns swinging open. It's imperative, Rodger. Else this place gonna be like the Walking Dead Season One."

"Ye… yes ma'am. Right away, righ… I hate zombies as much as…"

"And Rodger," she cut him off in mid-sentence. "When you're done with that, grease that damn squeaky cartwheel. Mrs. Fowler says it's giving her the awfulest migraine and I'm sick of listening to her ring that damn call button. Old bat just wants some narcotics."

"I feel that."

"Oh yeah. And dust the permanent botanicals at the front of the hall. The hydrangeas ought to be bright pink, not bathwater mauve."

"Yes ma'am, but I already…," he stopped. Nurse Cochren was already halfway back to the nurses' station

at the end of the hall. "Man, she's the portliest big gal I've ever seen."

She at once pirouetted like a figure skater and turned one hundred eighty degrees back around on the very tip of her left foot toes and stared Rodger down.

"Rodger!" Feigning to pull her hair out during her very graceful spin move, she screamed once again. "For the love of everything holy, Rodger. I was being very generous when I called these things dishwater mauve. These things are the color of death. Permanent botanicals don't die, Rodger. They don't! That's why they call them permanent."

That tracks, he said to himself. Laughing a bit. *Permanent Botanicals. Way to church it up, Cochren. Maybe try teaching them about photosynthesis next time so we don't have to dust them and pretend to water them. I'm tired of fronting for he patients. They gonna realize one day them things ain't real. They ain't that loony yet.*

"What was that, Rodger?" Nurse Cochren said.

"Nothing Head Nurse Cochren, nothing at all," wondering how, at her age, she could have possibly heard what he was saying from that distance. Old bat could probably hear a mouse break wind from over a hundred yards away.

He continued on toward the door of room 207, where it seemed to him like the smell gained weight. Like

it was hovering just a few feet off the floor like a fog in late fall. But who's to say? Just minutes before he got caught in revery, he had thought the same thing outside of room 206. He was certain Mrs. Fowler was smoking her cigars in bed again.

KNOCK KNOCK

"Mr. Edwards… Mr. Edwards. It's Rodger dodger. The Roge. Yo, Lon. Big Lon. Are you decent? You in here?"

No answer.

There was no sound except Corky chocking on earthworms on the television. Everyone here on the 200 hall loves The Don Sidwell Comedy Hour. The show first aired nearly a century ago. Don Sidwell has been dead for over forty years. He was the second most beloved wartime host of the USO Variety Shows back in the day. They say the house band music on the show is supposed to help in the early stages of dementia. Music and memory. Comedy and memory. These things are supposed to help.

"Mr. Edwards there's a strong odor of burning paper or glue or something like that on this hall and we are just checking every room to make sure everyone and everything is alright. Mr. Edwards… are you awake?"

Hearing no response Rodger opened the door completely and went on in. The TV was blaring. Sidwell was burning Corky's overalls with a red, white and blue fire-

work sparkler. But Edwards wasn't laughing. He wasn't in the room. Rodger moved to the bathroom door.

"Lonnie are you in there?"

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

The door slowly swings open. *Oh goodness I hope he is decent,* Rodger thought.

But he wasn't. There, that is. No one was there… just an open sit-down shower stall, a toilet with handrails, an embroidered navy-blue cotton robe (LDE, III) draped over the toilet arm on the left. If you were sitting, it would be the left. His pair of house slippers size 11½ and his assortment of monthly reading material was intact. On top *Uncle Tom's Floatable Bathroom Reader* covered a basket full of personal hygiene products. No Edwards, though.

Rodger, prone to distraction as he's demonstrated time and time again, began thumbing through the *Uncle Tom Book* before continuing his search for the missing Mr. Edwards and the smoke odor source.

Page 315 100% True Stats of Life:

Stat **#1**: 79% of statistical conclusions quoted in debates and arguments among friends are made up on the spot by the least eloquent of all involved parties. Of that 79%, 37% turns out to be 60% true 50% of the time so long as the major and minor premises which frame and thus create a need for a statistical conclusion are inter-

changeable. The remaining 40% isn't necessarily false 100% of the time— only not fully provable by statistical means alone. At least not with Uncle Tom's Rudimentary Logic Skillsets.

Conclusion: Though 95% of Thesauruses currently on the market would say otherwise, Trust Uncle Tom in this situation and know for certain that Truth is not synonymous with Fact. And the statistics and outcomes generated in any study depend wholly on the sociopolitical agenda of the organization funding the study. What that means for Global Warming is anyone's guess.

Uncle Tom says according to his studies, he's 100% certain it's true. But he owns 2500 sandy acres in Nevada and if by some chance the water gets that high during global warming, he'll have one hell of a private beach. Uncle Tom has always wanted his own beach. Topless bodyboarding anyone?

Rodger chuckled to himself a bit and thought he might like to get his own copy of that book. He thought, *that's true, I make up stats all the time in conversation.*

And just as he was about to read Stat #2, the odor of smoke wafted into his nostrils, and he sensed it then as strong and palpable as he had since he first smelled it when he was cleaning the plastic flowers. The first time he smelled it, Head Nurse Cochren had asked him to take care of the flowers first, as if the smell were no problem.

That's it!, he thought, as he stood in Mr. Edwards' bathroom, open book in his hands, *someone is burning a book, maybe. But what sense did that make? And where is Lonnie? He should be here at this time of day.'*

Rodger put Uncle Tom's Floatable Bathroom Reader back where he found it and returned to the room. On the TV Sidwell was using a fire extinguisher to put Corky out. He checked the closet, under the bed, and behind the opened door again.

He checked everywhere an elderly dementia patient could possibly hide in a room like this one… if they were so inclined to hide. However, Mr. Edwards is a bit of a practical joker so that's not out of the question. He'd be one to hide and jump out and scare the hell out of an unsuspecting orderly or a nurse.

In the closet he found eight pairs of matching Birddog™ overalls, an umbrella, a raincoat, a portable typewriter and an antique leather briefcase presumably empty judging by its weight. And he saw some old boxes of what looked to be family photo albums and things of that sort. No Edwards.

Under the bed, where there's usually only two large white boxes with removable lids, ones very much like those in which copy paper is sold in bulk, he didn't find a thing. No Edwards there either… unless of course… no, that's absurd.

Behind the door there was nothing but a rubber wall stopper and a full-length poster: a cut-away depiction of the internal human anatomy: vital organs and skeletal system labeled with a brief description of the major functions of each part. If that was Edwards, smoke and fire would be the least of his worries.

Puzzled, he spun about the room and sat down atop the electric bed. *It isn't community time. Not Snack or dinner.* He checks the facility schedule. *There are no on-going events. It isn't like Mr. Edwards to leave his room even during these things.*

He's usually rummaging through that old box of his – *wait*, Rodger thinks*, is there two boxes or one? Is one missing with Mr. Edwards? Or both? No, maybe, I think – just one, I believe. Yes. One. Or two?*

Maybe he has a private visitation scheduled in the visitors' room. But then, he hasn't had one of those in years, but maybe, thought Rodger, *maybe, just maybe, maybe, maybe, maybe* – as he slowly slips back into reverie*, maybe, maybe, maybe* –

Where is River Grove?

"SIT UP, MR. EDWARDS."

"Why?"

"Because, I'm here to make a few adjustments to an electrical component that's been shorting out on your bed."

"Is that why it's been damn near throwing me onto the floor without warning and not a button pushed? Geez oh my. I thought this damn thing was haunted, that's all… you know, with all the folks who have died in here on this same bed where I sleep."

"Haunted? Lord naw, Mr. Edwards. The only thing that haunts this place is me. Now lean up just a bit more."

"You? Haunt this place? Ha! The Olive Branch has seen more deaths than all the electric chairs in Texas."

"Olive Branch? What you talking about, Mr. Edwards? You in the New South Oakton Retirement Home. This is the 200 hundred hall. Ain't no Olive Branch. There you

go again. You're going to get the others confused, Lonnie. I need you to focus."

"South Oakton? South Oakton? I don't know what they teaching ya'll in schools nowadays, but when I was young, when Daddy was doing his daddy's follow-up research on the mysterious death of Merel Gene McAlister, this place was called The Olive Branch. I'm sure of it. Ouch! That's far's I can go, can't bear no further. Get me that box right there, Roge. We'll see what the heirlooms say. My photo albums, too."

"That'un there? Under ya bed?"

"That's the one. On the left side."

"Ain't this the one that's been a-bothering you so much since the day you got here? I know its worried that poor Mrs. Fowler across the hall. She says you said it has ghosts in it."

"Well, even if so, she worries the rest of us to death having to breathe in them damn cigars every morning. Naw, the other one. The one on the right is what I call the haunted box."

"Agreed. Cigars stink. Can't make em drink. Anyway, lead em. You won't me to toss it, Lonnie? The other one? Head Nurse Cochren says you got just one more strike and they're gonna have to put you over in the Blue Hall if you keep being disruptive."

"No! Don't you touch that damn box, Rodger! Matter

of fact don't even look at it, else you'll start to hear things like me, hear them going on and on about all the ones that have done gone. That's the box of the dead. Obits and eulogies, Last Will & Testaments. No sir! You leave that thing be. Just take my word for it, Rodger. I don't even open it, hardly."

"But I seen you going through it just the other day, Mr. Edwards. And who are these dead folks? Relatives?"

"Oh no you didn't boy! I ain't ever opened that one. Not for more than a peek, that is. The one with Momma and Daddy's heirlooms sure. From time to time I open that one. That's what you seen probably. But I never open that one, never more than a half-peek. And them, they's all the dead that ever died in River Grove. Them's the unsettled dead of River Grove in there. Every obit The Herald ever ran for over a hundred years. Parade day deaths especially. Event deaths. Public. No sir, Rodger, you ain't ever seen ol Lonnie Dale Edwards III open that box for long! No Sir."

"So why not just pitch it out and be done with it? You ain't in River Grove, Mr. Edwards. Hell, I never even heard of River Grove. And them folks bound to be dead a long long time anyway, wherever they are— or were. Lift up just a bit more. One more screw and nut, and there you go. Bed all fixed. You have a good day now Mr. Edwards." Rodger was quickly trying to leave the room,

but Edwards started back to talking to him and he had to stay a bit longer. Mr. Edwards was starting to freak him out, though.

"I'm telling you Rodger, as long as that box stays closed, the dead stay dead. There's only one real way to get rid of them for good, anyway."

"I understand, Mr. Edwards."

"You don't believe me, do you? You think just because I'm on this hall that I'm crazy, don't ya? Well, maybe I am. But I know what I know. Granddaddy put them voices from the past in that box for a reason. So he would forget about them and get on with his life, quit dwelling so hard on the past. Like he could correct what happened in real life by running a redaction in the Sunday paper. He wanted to remember the good things that happened in the community. Print apologies if need be. Like the parades or Fall Picnic misprints and all. He didn't want folks thinking all the time about the friends and family that had passed on before their time, like he did. He didn't want people remembering the accidental obits. Same names, wrong person incidents. Anybody can understand that. Can't you Rodger boy?"

"Yeah. But Mr. Edwards, people can find out about any of those deaths if they want to, if there was such a place as River Grove. Certificates of death are matters of public record. They aren't deep dark secrets that one

man can trap in a box so the whole world will forget them. Your grandfather may have written about all those deaths and put them in that box for historical prosperity. And legal concerns. Debtors and all. Estates. Probate concerns. But we still have the obits at the newspaper archive. It wasn't because he was trying to hide them. He was just a writer documenting events, everyday events, events in a place you call River Grove. The obits. The notices. Most likely your grandfather invented that town in a story of his. Or maybe he used that name in his personal records for privacy concerns. If someone got into his records they'd think it was somewhere else. You know what I mean Mr. Edwards?

"I reckon," Lonnie let it go this time. A man can't learn what he thinks he already knows.

"And like them stories you write at night there at your desk, they're just like ghosts stories. Have you ever heard of *The Spoon River Anthology*?"

"I reckon you're about to tell me about it," Lonnie said.

"I'll bring you a copy. Oh, and by the way, speaking of writing at night, if Head Nurse Cochren catches you with a candle, she'll have your skin."

"I ain't got no candles you buffoon! That flame flickering down the hall is Foul Fowler lighting her stogies."

"Well that's just what I've been told. I ain't accusing

you. But like I was saying, the souls of the dead don't get trapped in words on papers stashed in a box under a man's bed. I don't mean to insult you, Mr. Edwards. I just hate to see your mind slipping away on you like it is. Who knows… them voices you think you're hearing could be the creaks and moans of this broken bed. That's probably exactly what it is, Mr. Edwards. Now that I got this thing fixed, bingo, them voices'll never so much as whisper your name again." Rodger patted the bed with a slight, light-hearted smirk on his face, every now and then glancing at the box then back at Mr. Edwards.

Just as Rodger reached the door to leave the room, Mr. Edwards lifted the back of his electric bed so he could sit upright and address Rodger again before he got away.

"Rodger, I grew up in River Grove. So did Momma and Daddy. It's a real place on parade day. How come you ain't never heard of it?"

That Smell, II:
A Frame Story Continued

RODGER CAME TO FROM his reverie again. Several dilemmas still at hand. The smell. The missing Edwards. A list of duties to complete before shift's end. There was no time to waste.

A thought hit him. *I know!*

He bolted up off Mr. Edwards' bed and hit his knees to take a look under the bed. "It's gone, too!"

With the gait of an Olympic sprinter he started toward the door, hurtled the one visitor's chair allotted each patient's room, and exited 207.

There it was again. He was hit with the blooming smell of burnt paper, cardboard, and what could only be described as the vague traces of industrial adhesive. His next moves would require the tactical precision and orderly execution of a NATO investigator. The smell came first; if there was a fire in the building, it certainly took precedent over a missing patient. Secondly, a missing patient took

precedent over their missing personal possessions. And whatever shift work was left could wait.

He kept his sprint up into room 209, skipping the recently vacated 208. All was well. Mr. Adams was sound asleep snoring to the tune of, "This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land."

Then he nearly broke the door down to room 210, where Ethel Glass was doing her special Pilates Yoga mixed routine in a backless paper gown.

"Baaaahh. SO SORRY, Miss Glass. We are investigating a potential fire."

"We? We? You got a mouse in your pocket you pervert!?"

Rodger nearly splintered the door jam slamming it to. Room 210 was sealed for good in Rodger's mind. The image of Miss Glass bent over in a downward dog pose nearly overwhelmed all five of his senses, and for a moment he felt deaf and blind. His childhood flashed into his mind and he recalled a scene from the film about Helen Keller. He could now relate to her condition, and he begged for forgiveness for all the mean things he had said about her and her dog.

But there was no time for Rodger to ruminate on the person he could have become had he listened to his preacher and history teacher when he was a small boy. No time to ask for forgiveness for all his sins. Back to the

task at hand.

Room 211 was being renovated. Nothing but your typical industrial construction odors there. No signs of fire or ashes.

Room 212 was a supply closet. He knew nothing was awry there but he checked anyway. Nothing but solvents, scented toilet wafers, bags of vomit absorber (which looks and smells exactly like kitty litter), powdered latex gloves, mop and bucket, push broom, alcohol-free window cleaner, boxes of brown paper tri-fold towels for restroom use only, and one yellow caution wet floor sign. No fire. No ashes. No smell of smoke.

Room 213. Empty snack room. Flickering florescent bulb. No fire or smoke or smell of either. That leaves just one room left on the hall. 214. The circuits room. He was sure he'd find the source of the smell there.

The door was locked. Luckily, Rodger has access to the breakers inside. A blown fuse? Surely, the smell was coming from a blown fuse and was somehow drifting into the duct work above it and diffusing up and down the hall. What else could it be? Every other room was clear. But no. He was wrong. All circuits were intact. Network lights blinking in proper sequence: green, orange, yellow, red, repeat. Not the slightest evidence of flame. As a matter of fact, he couldn't even smell that smell in room 214.

A slight tinge of fear began to take hold of Rodger. If

he didn't find the source he may as well find a new place to work (which would be a near impossibility in this economy), because Head Nurse Cochren would absolutely have his pink slip ready even before he could finish telling her that he was all out of options. So, he closed the door to room 214 and slumped to the floor inside.

All was black except for the rotating colors on the mother board just above his head. For a moment he was transported back to the tilt-a-whirl games of his childhood, the allure of bright carnival excitement. Green. Orange. Yellow. Red. Bright lights of youth. The same pulse that lures small children and idiots to rigged carnival games. *The kids just want the overstuffed rabbit*, he thought. *They have no vendetta against the carnival worker that keeps taking their parents' money. The middle-aged men just want to beat the system or impress a lady. They hold personal grudges against the man behind the counter with an apron full of one dollar bills.*

Something changed for Rodger while he was slumped over in the floor of room 214. Finding the source of that smell became a bit of a carnival game obsession. Edwards has him spooked. It's not that the whole pursuit had driven him over the edge. But close. And it's not that the flashing lights in room 214 had made him go mad. But close. And it was kinda the opposite really. It became simple. The time spent in 214 had afforded him a perspective he hadn't had as he was checking all the other rooms. Or it cemented his

fate. He had pursued that smell with the vendetta of a man trying to beat the carnival and impress his lady. Head Nurse Cochren in Rodger's case. And this had proved thus far to be a total failure. Those lights reminded him of his simple childhood when there was nothing sinister behind the counter of the carnival games. *Get it together, Preston.*

Perhaps there was no big fire to begin with. Maybe it wasn't dangerous smoke he was smelling. Maybe someone had lit a match to light a candle in the aromatherapy room. Maybe one of the nurses had failed to fully extinguish her cigarette in the break room ashtray and the paper around the filter was still smoldering but could cause no harm because the ashtray is filled with sand and no small flame could spread beyond its outer barrier. Who knows?

Rodger had been looking for signs of huge, dangerous blazes. He had been looking for signs of flames large enough to engulf half a city block. He had had a vendetta against that smell like it was going to incinerate the whole building at any minute. Perhaps in all his haste he had overlooked a small detail, evidence of an innocent and harmless flame. He seemed to be the only one worried anyway. Well— he and Nurse Cochren. And she worries with everything. Everything else was carrying on as usual. Like no one smelled the smell but them.

He rose to his feet and opened the door. Upon his exit from 214 he would take a different approach to finding the source of that smell. He had to think like that smell, become the smell itself. It's an old private investigator tactic mostly used to catch human criminals. But Rodger saw no reason why it couldn't work in this situation. He stood in the middle of the hallway unflinching and in total silence, searching the archives of his mind.

If I were a smell from a small smoldering flame or something like that, he thought, '*where would I hide in a nursing home? I don't suppose I could choose myself since I would be just a smell and not something with life and the power of choice… but if I could, where would I be? Miss Glass's underwear drawer where she keeps her flashlight and stamp collection, because the wires in the flashlight could short and light up those stamps? No. No, heavens no, that place would choke me out before I was able to escape from the bottom of the pile, much less the drawer itself. Beneath Mrs. Fowler's electric blanket and heating pad which she only uses when she watches reruns of The Don Sidwell Hour? No, that Sidwell is as insufferable as any program that's ever cursed the screen. I'd sooner die of asphyxiation beneath an elephant as to smolder through that and make my way into the nostrils of everyone on the two hundred hall. Where would I hide… if I could? Wilmoth's old robe? No… Cochren's desk? Naw, she'd think something was grilling and get to thinking about ba-*

bayback ribs and then I wouldn't be so much an unwanted smell as I would be a catalyst for ravenous nurse hunger, and I'd be nothing to worry the orderly with and so never need to be found in the first place. Where. Would. I. Be? In that – of – Edwards? Wait a tick – Edwards. Edwards. Gone – of course. The Box!'

The Importance of Permanent Botanicals

"RODGER! I THOUGHT I told you to tend to those flowers." Head Nurse Cochren said.

"Yes, but the smoke odor. I've checked the rooms. I thought…"

"Never mind the odor Rodger. Probably nothing more than Miss Glass' back sweat from doing her yoga stuff. Probably in your head."

"Pilates Yoga mix."

"Whatever. I can hardly smell it if at all. All I can smell is sweet sweet milk chocolate and coconut cream—" Head Nurse Cochren's eyes glazed over for a brief second and she seemed to be looking through Lonnie and through the interior hallway walls and past the soda machine and into the window front of the snack machine and through the snack wrapper even. She was looking at candy.

"But those hydrangeas, I can still see them. Pale as dish water, pale as old dirty dish water. Visions of slow death.

How's that supposed to cheer anybody up?"

"But Head Nurse Cochren, Mr. Edwards is gone."

"Who?"

"Room 207."

"Oh, Yeah, the fellow with the voices in the box. He thinks the obits talk to him. Well. What about him? What's he got to do with you cleaning them flowers?"

"He's gone, ma'am."

"Everybody on this hall is gone, Rodger. Tell me something I don't know."

"No, you don't understand. He's really really gone."

"Welcome to the 200 Hall, Rodger. That's the nature of things here. Some have good days. Others, well, some days they're really really gone, as you so kindly put it. Now, get the permanent botanicals bright and shining or you'll really be gone. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. You understand me?— Now then, where was I? Oh yes. Room 213. Snack time."

Nurse Cochren headed off down the hall sniffing the burnt air but now dismissing it for candy. *Is she hangry?* Lonnie thought. *Is her sugar low?*

Her hips pushed side to side like two hams fighting under a fallen parachute; like two sows fighting in a pup tent. She didn't so much take human steps as she did waddle like water fowl on the banks of a city lake.

The static electricity that was generated between her thighs,

Rodger thought as he watched her waddle away, *could power the whole block (arcade included) if one could manage to harness it. What a waste*, he thought.

But if it's pink shiny plastic hydrangeas she wants, instead of the whereabouts of the missing patient and the source of the odor, then bygosh the permanent botanicals in the two hundred hall would sparkle like they just opened, like today was the first day of permanent botanical spring. If the building burns at least the fake flowers will look great before they melt.

The Unreliability of Rodger Preston

RODGER TURNED AWAY FROM the fake plants when he felt the static from Head Nurse Cochren's thighs gathering in the atmosphere and in the hairs on his neck as she was returning from her snack break. He hadn't cleaned even a single petal of the hydrangeas. He had been thinking of Mr. Edwards.

"Head Nurse Cochren. You've lived here all your life, right?"

"Yeah, so." Her cheeks were stuffed with caramel and chocolate coconut truffles.

"You ever heard of River Grove?"

"Is that one of them television reality teen dramas? If I catch you watching TV on the clock Rodger—" the joy she was getting from the candy made her momentarily forget that she was scalding Rodger for something he hadn't done.

"Head Nurse Cochren. Nurse Cochren."

"What? Oh yeah. If I catch you watching TV on the

clock, I'm going to have you spot Miss Glass while she does her Tai Bo. You hear me?"

"Pilates Yoga mix."

"Huh?"

"Miss Glass does a Pilates Yoga mix."

"New Age Hippy. Even so. That's what you'll be doing if I catch you watching your River Groove on the clock. Of course, I don't watch River Groove, Rodger. I'm an educated woman. I read for entertainment."

"Grove. River Grove. What? No. Have you ever heard of a little township around this area or maybe in Hanover County called River Grove? Not a TV show."

"That's what I said, Rodger." She began sniffing the hallway air, and then she took one long sniff with her chin up as if she were trying to differentiate between the caramel smell and the smell from her chocolate snacks.

"Rodger do you smell something burning?"

Has everyone lost their ever-loving minds on this hall? Rodger thought. Biting his lip to keep from blurting out. *Has the whole building contracted momentary amnesia?*

"Like your thighs," he said under his breath.

"Do what?"

"Like burned flies, I said. It smells like burned flies. Like when flies and bugs get caught in a light fixture and the bulb chars their exoskeletons. That's what it smells like. And yes, we've been over this already. Are you okay?

What do you think? I mentioned it earlier, remember…?"

"No. Yeah. Not really. Maybe. I've been busy, Rodger. I can't do everything around here. Enough with the botanicals, Rodger. They look much better. Find that smell. I think maybe construction lights."

"I haven't even dusted them yet. And you said earlier that—"

"Never mind what I said earlier. I save lives for goodness sake! I haven't the time for dusting fake flowers or tracking down strange construction odors. If it doesn't involve saving or sustaining lives, Rodger, I have no need to remember the trivial small talk I make with orderlies or maintenance men. That's an order Rodger. Find that smell. Eliminate it."

"I'm about to go to lunch and then finish laundry duties. It might be better if third shift looked into it."

"I don't care if you have to stay all night and work right through until morning. If that be the case you may take a short power nap in room 208 at shift's end. That way you can recharge your batteries and find whatever it is that's putting off that Christ-forsaken odor. What's-his-name just died, so the bed in room 208 is vacant. Might change the sheets, though. He bled out."

"Bled out? Mr. Greely? I hate to hear that."

"Yeah. Had pancreas cancer and the tube draining the

excess bile from his body cavity somehow got wrapped around his upper thigh, and when he went to raise the back of his bed, the tube caught in the bed's mechanism and tightened so much it severed his femoral artery. He got lucky, really."

"Lucky? Lucky? How's that?"

"Poor man was gonna starve before fall anyway. War vet I believe. Had ever communal disease in the book. I can't believe he lived to be over a hundred years old. Them jungle countries got more streetwalkers than they do trees. It's really no wonder we never outright won that war. Them boys kept getting distracted. Poor fellows."

"I know it. They didn't want to be there no-ways. Look at pictures of them in their older years. Most of them look twenty years older than they were, and there wasn't but just a few of them that didn't go crazy as a bat by the time they were thirty, crazy or homeless."

"I know that's true, Rodger. My ex-husband's daddy was drafted into that war and his sister used to tell me that when he got back he'd hang clothes out on the line in the pouring rain."

"Lord have mercy."

"Amen. Hard to watch a man in all his dignity whistling Dixie in the hard rain under a clothesline with every stitch of clothing he's got fitting on half a line, and him standing with lighting above him like a deranged Ben

Franklin just home from the Republic of Vietnam. But I'm getting off track here. I was hangry earlier. I apologize, Rodger. But do me a favor, you got to find that smell before you clock out."

"Yes ma'am."

"Oh… Rodger, wait just a minute there. What was you saying earlier about 207?"

"Mr. Edwards. He wasn't there when he should have been. I went by his room this morning. I think some of his things were gone, too."

"Rodger, you're working too hard or your hangry. I just come by there. He's there doing what he's always doing. Talking to no one. Might try checking the work lights in the room they're renovating. Maybe some lady bugs or a moth or something got caught up in it."

Rodger had already dropped his feather duster into his cart and was sprinting to 207.

Room 207, Revisited

He knocked twice but didn't wait for an answer. He flung open the door. There he was. Upright in his bed, carrying on about a man named Daniel and his younger brother Adam. Presumably, given the minute details that he always could recall, these were real people from Mr. Edwards' past in River Grove. *Maybe there was such a place as River Grove*, Lonnie thought. *Maybe I'm wrong. Heck, maybe I'm a resident here, too. After today, who knows?*

"There he is. Rodger, my boy. What's got you out of breath? That Cochren, she's a real mule-driver, huh. What's she got you up to this time? Let me guess. You gotta re-stitch my mattress with your teeth? What's got you son? You see a Ghost?"

"Where were you earlier this morning?"

"Well, if I told you I was in my room in the Olive Branch in River Grove, I know you'd tell me that such a place doesn't exist."

"No way. I came by here and and and— I knocked and

the door was open so I came in and—"

"Breathe Rodger, slow down."

"And there was no one here and—"

"I was probably using the rest room, Roge. Probably in the shower. I'm planning on stepping out front this afternoon to watch the Parade. Figured I'd clean up."

"No, sir. I checked. I know we aren't supposed to be in resident's rooms if they aren't in them, but I was worried because no one on the 200 Hall really ever leaves their room."

"I ain't moved an inch today, except, like I said, to shower. We, Lady Ann Fowler and me, were wondering if you were coming in this afternoon. We noticed the flowers were a little dusty. First shift never dusts the décor. And we hadn't seen you since last weekend. Have a seat. Check your blood pressure there. You're sweating."

"No sir. I mean yes sir. I'll have a seat. I come by. I did. I come in."

"What time, Rodger? Did you change to first shift?

"No. Actually—I—I don't know why I came in early. But I did. Yes. I came in early. And then there was this smell so I looked everywhere in here. And you were gone. And your boxes were gone. And I thought—"

"Nonsense, Rodger my boy. They're working you too hard. That was probably yesterday afternoon if you came in. On second shift. I was at bingo. Like every Friday. La-

dy Ann and me were sharing a single card. Decreases our chances of hitting Bingo, but it increases our chances of scoring. If you know what I mean. But I aint seen you since last Friday. How was your vacation? You okay?"

"No no no. I was here. I'm fine. This morning. And no, Lonnie, I wasn't on vacation last week. I always take vacation the last week in May. It's not even April yet."

"Rodger, it's Old Timers Day today. It's already May."

"What about that smell, do you smell it?"

"Okay. Settle down."

"Do you smell it?" Rodger snapped.

"Yes. I do. But they already—"

"Exactly. So I came in early and and and—

"Head Nurse Cochren didn't tell you?"

"Yes. No no no. She didn't tell me to find he smell. I just started looking. Actually, no one was at the nurse's station. I didn't see anyone; I just started looking because it was so strong, and I thought Mrs. Fowler had started smoking cigars again or something was on fire. I thought maybe you lit a candle. I thought something was on fire. And then I left Mrs. Fowler's room and I started back across the hall to come here and then I, I, I smelled it stronger in the hall so I stopped for a minute and just, just tried to smell it. And I started thinking about that time you told me about River Grove and all about your Dad. And Granddad. And It was probably about, I'm not

sure what time. And then, and then, and—"

"It's a light burnt smell. They said that. Then you came by here?

"Exactly. Today. Just this morning."

"I don't believe so, Rodger. It's parade day."

"It's what? Where are your boxes?

"Parade day. Old Timers Day. The 181st. The old newspaper and notes box? I put it in the closet. You wanna see some old newspaper clippings from parades past? Maybe settle you down. Get your mind right."

"I don't know. But I know I ain't crazy, Mr. Edwards. You were gone. Head Nurse Cochren smelled the smell. And we don't have time for this."

"Time for what? The parade don't even start until noon. It won't be down this far until plumb past two o'clock."

"Time for this. That smell is just too strong to wait any longer. Call the Head Nurse. We're gonna have to evacuate the building."

This place is going to burn down again, Lonnie thought as he was gathering himself in Room 207. *Parade day? Ain't no parades in New South Oakton. I've heard this one before!*

Practice for The Lying Contest

"Now, MR. EDWARDS WE ain't got time for none of that nonsense. I hate to say it Lonnie, but there are no voices coming from the box that are telling you all about the history of this place you say existed years and years ago. Ain't no fairy ghost historians revealing themselves to you like you are the sole custodian of The Historical Records. And I took the batteries out of your tape player."

"You did?"

"Yes. So, I know it ain't accidently playing no lecture tapes in here either. By the way, that's the source of those voices you and everyone else keeps hearing. You left your tape deck running and it automatically rewinds and starts Side B."

"Ain't nonsense, though. Knew I was hearing something. This place did burned down years and years ago. And now that burning smell is seeping out of the past and coming right up through that box and into the present. Daddy said it would happen one day. Said those stories are

always right on our heels. Eventually, they'll catch up to us and force their way back into this life with us. This is how the past works, Rodger. The past has caught up with us. The old Olive Branch, this place here, it burned once. And that box on the left there miraculously made it through with nothing more than a little water and smoke damage."

"Well, there you go, it smells like smoke because it survived a fire. But that don't make it haunted."

"There was once fire engulfing the exact place were we now sit."

"This building has been here since they bulldozed the old dialysis clinic that used to be here, or right next door, technically. It never burned. The only building that has ever burned in New South Oakton proper is the old Jackson Drug Store on Main. And that burned before I was born and probably before you were born even."

"Oh it burned and It'll burn again. The first time they blamed it on my father, Lonnie Edwards II. He was a resident here at the time, though at that time we hadn't seen each other or spoken in many years. You see, just like my granddaddy kept a box filled with his work. Daddy wrote his histories too. Of all those Granddaddy wrote, the one about the parade where Old Man McAlister died was nearest to his heart. But for whatever reason he could never finish it like he did all the others. Every time he'd finish a history he'd bind it, read it to Momma and me, then sub-

mit it to be archived at the River Grove Library, which they renamed several years after he passed on: The Haddox Memorial Library. To my knowledge all his histories remain there still to this day. But the fact that he never finished the one about the parade was the source of his greatest heartache, the very anguish of his passion and vice versa. The years wore on and on...

"Every year that parade whittled away at my grandfather's and my father's— and thus mine— flesh and heart and bones until finally there was so little of us (him) left that he had to put it away for good. Us too. The history of the parade swallowed him whole. Before he died he asked his son, my father, to carry on with the story, finish the investigation if he could. Of course, Daddy couldn't say no."

"What's all this got to do with the odor, Mr. Edwards?"

"I'm getting there. That story did the same thing to Daddy that it did to Granddaddy. He gave so much of himself over to the work that there wasn't enough left for a normal life. Me and Momma had to have him committed to The Olive Branch. He let old ghosts take over his real life. From time to time we'd check in with the orderly to see what his progress was. Always the same. Day and night he would take out his box and work until fatigue got the best of him."

"Like you do."

"And then one day— it was the third Saturday in May— the orderlies told us that he, for whatever reason, took a stack of old notebook paper—notes concerning the parade's effect on his mental health if I had to guess at it—and burned them all in an empty room here at The Olive Branch. He thought he heard voices coming out of the papers. He'd left all of the notes *he'd* made about the damn parade in a box on his bed with a note that said, "please make sure my son gets this box." And they did. By some act of divine intervention, the entire north side of the Alzheimer's hall was basically untouched by the fire that Daddy set. The box survived."

"What happened after that?"

"He didn't mean to burn half the building down. Just wanted to cause a distraction so he could escape, it turns out. He put on his favorite overalls and walked right out the front door and just vanished, apparently. A few minutes later that part of the building was engulfed in flames. They found Daddy later that day. He was muttering to himself and sweeping confetti down the middle of Main St. Cleaning up after the parade."

"So you're saying you think that smoke smell that you obviously know is just from smoke damage is actually a your dad's spirit coming back from the past to what? Haunt you? Haunt this place? The way you tell it, this place already has about a hundred ghosts too many I can't

imagine how any self-respecting ghost could find room to haunt this place. Just like them voices, huh Mr. Edwards? Turns out it was a tape deck. The smell of the specter! Turns out it was just a smoke-damaged box of newspapers. Are you heading your own warnings, Lonnie? You act like your family deserves to be haunted by a proper set of ghosts. And not just old obits and family skeletons in the closet. Does it?"

"Don't be silly, Rodger. How can you believe an old man on the crazy hall? Of course that smell is just old smoke on a box. But it reminded me of that story about when Daddy burned down the Olive Branch because he thought he was hearing voices coming out of Granddaddy's notebook. You know how smell is so closely linked to memory. You know there ain't nothing in that box but a bunch of old notes and stuff. Those voices are just my imagination getting away with me. It runs in the family. Story of my life… that box," he laughed.

"So, why are you telling me this, again?"

"I need to practice, Rodger. And besides, every good story is a ghost story to some degree. Everybody needs a reminder that if you go looking for ghosts hard enough, if you let your mind get fixated on the specters of the immaterial world, you'll surely to find them all around you. You'll turn all that figment-stuff loose on the real world."

"Practice for what?"

"The 180th Old Timers Lying Contest. Held every year after the parade. Now, hand me my Birddogs™ and my boots. Would you, Rodger? We old timers got practice in the group room. I'm running late."

Alright Lonnie Edwards III. You win, Rodger thought. *I'll play your game.*

Resolving Rodger's Conflict

RODGER PRESTON MARCHED BACK out into the middle of the Alzheimer's Hall, shook off his reveries, grabbed a maintenance radio off the squeaking supply cart, and turned it to channel 9, SOS channel. *This is not a drill. This is not a story.*

No squelch static. No noise. No feedback. Radio malfunction.

Of course it's dead, why would it not be dead.

Panic had already set in. The smoke smell was everywhere. Rodger swore it was. Swore that it filled the entire hall. He quickly developed a smoker's cough, or worse. He nearly began to suffocate. As a longtime sufferer of Acute Anxiety Disorder, Rodger was familiar with hyperventilation. He got down on his knees to get a breath of air that was free of the smoke smell. He caught his breath and began crawling toward the cafeteria double doors. He thought, *Chicken Fried Leftover Saturday. My favorite; hate to miss it.* Just inside the cafeteria door, he reached the fire

extinguisher and yanked it off the wall. And when he did, swooshhhhhhhhhhssssshhhhhhhhhssshh

"Oh. My. God. Get to the nearest door! Get to a fire exit! Watch yourself. This thing has mad pressure."

He spun three times around in a circle. "Gotta keep moving. Keep it away from your face so you can breathe. Yall go ahead of me. I'm going to try to find the source and put it out, or in, or whatever it takes. Get out now. The oxygen is leaving the room."

Back out in the 200 Hall, Rodger spun in circles while spraying the extinguisher on every wall, every drop ceiling tile, and nearly every square inch of the floor. This made it nearly impossible for him to keep his balance or stand back up on two feet once he fell down on his way toward the exit. Whoever he was yelling at earlier either went out a different way or they were never there to begin with and he was speaking rhetorically to anyone who might be there, just in case. A firm warning yelled into the vacant afternoon hall.

Get up, Rodger. You're the only hope. Get up, damn it! Find it. Put it out. Or in. Then get out alive, Rodger told himself, which at this point not even he could tell if he was screaming aloud or just thinking loudly.

By the time he made it out the front door with the extinguisher in his hand and covered in a fine white powder, he was sufficiently exhausted and deep in the throws of

what appeared to be a paranoid psychotic episode. He didn't even make it to the sidewalk benches before being tackled by the security team at the facility.

"Get off me! The place is gonna burn down if we don't do something," he said despite the fact that by this time he had already accepted that there was no fire, if he was ever convinced at all. So, he continued with the antics so he wouldn't appear maliciously culpable in the incident. "Get off me. Call the fire department. I'm trying to save them. OWWWWWWWWW. OH! Ouch! My pinky finger. Get off me."

A nearby patrol officer who was directing and routing the hot rod parade traffic stopped what he was doing to assist the security guards. When the third man began to subdue him, Rodger knew that he wasn't going anywhere quickly. So, he quit fighting, let go of the extinguisher, rolled over on his stomach, and put his hands behind his back. "I think there was a fire. Maybe still is," he said calmly as he was being detained.

When they got him stood up and brushed off, they sat him down on one of the benches near the sidewalk on the corner of Cardinal and Main. They cleared the white retardant out of his mouth and out of his eyes.

"What are you doing? What is your name, sir?

Rodger Preston looked up past the officer and realized only then that something was going on. He looked at all

the people along the avenues. Up and down both sides of the street out front were crowds of smiling people. They were dressed in their Sunday best it looked like. More were gathered at venue tents and kiosks setup in every available space as far as he could see. Men. Women. Families. Children of all ages. Business people. Farmers. Well-dressed debutantes. Long-haired hippies. Post-Millennials. Hip-hoppers. Country Boys and Girls. City staffers. All your basic freaks and dignitaries of a small rural town in the American South.

"What is your name, sir?"

An entire community of people was out enjoying the day, enjoying the activities, just enjoying life. At no point did Rodger expect to hear or see a fire engine responding to the scene of the event. He couldn't explain the smell, but he knew he'd not seen a fire. And the extinguisher wasn't his fault. But tell them that.

"What is your name, sir?"

"What's going on?" Rodger asked.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. What is going on? Is there or ain't there a fire?"

"I mean in the street. What's going on? Why are these people here? Where is here?"

"Duh, sir. It's the third Saturday in May. It's parade day."

"Parade?"

Not a single person had even noticed him screaming as he came out the front door covered in white powder. Too much jubilee to notice Icarus making a light splash in the background of life. No one noticed his spraying a fire extinguisher like a mad man.

As the officer bent down to adjust the handcuffs on him, Rodger got a good look at the deputy's badge.

RIVER GROVE SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT

What kind of fresh hell is this? Rodger thought.

"What's your name, sir? Do you have any ID on you?"

"His name is Preston. Rodger Preston."

"You know this man, sir?

"I do. He's the weekend second shift orderly at the retirement home there."

"And you are?"

"Lonnie Dale Edwards III."

"Mr. Edwards," the deputy almost swallowed his tongue. "My— my apologies, sir. I did not recognize you without your coat and hat on. You know this man?"

"That's correct, sir. He works at the Olive Branch on the weekends. He's been with us for going on four years now."

"Mr. Preston, can you tell me what's going on here? I'll get them cuffs off of you if you can help me understand what's going on," the deputy asked.

"I smelled smoke, sir. In the building. And it got

stronger. So, I figured I'd go ahead and take the precaution of getting the extinguisher from the cafeteria and putting it up near the front of the hall. Closer to where the residents are."

"Did you actually see a fire?"

Rodger looked at the badge again. Then he glanced over at the street where the officer's cruiser was sitting and read the signs. Behind the officer, accenting the horizon line as the tallest man-made thing around, he saw a rusting water tower with a freshly painted welcome sign that read:

WELCOME TO DOWNTOWN RIVER GROVE

"Sir, did you see an actual fire? The security guards are saying that there are no signs of fire in the building. And that the fire system is up and online and functioning properly. Be honest with me. I can't help you unless you're honest with me."

Rodger turned to look at Lonnie. Then back again at the water tower. Then he scanned the panorama of the downtown area. He thought, *this looks like a movie set. All the extras. It seems so rehearsed. So staged it looks natural, or an approximation of natural.*

"I don't know— the smoke smell was so strong. And I didn't want anyone to get hurt because mostly that hall is, well, the residents wouldn't notice if there were a fire. I think this chemical retardant is making me ill. Can you

call medical, please?"

Foreshadowing: Disaster at The Parade?

A STEADY RHYTHM OF HARD clacking noises just became audible in the distance, and the deputy, Rodger, and Lonnie turned toward the street. The sounds were faint and growing louder quickly. A line of tubas joined in. It sounds like a fight song. The Parade is on its way.

Traffic had backed up when the deputy left his post to attend to Rodger. Main St was now a chaotic parking lot and people were growing impatient. By the looks of things, downtown was quickly about to become a demolition derby if left unchecked.

"We got a situation down here, over," the deputy called the station. "Requesting backup. Send medical. Over."

The deputy's face was a fine balance of veteran law enforcement officer composure and petrified horror as all the empty space in downtown quickly filled up. There was no room at all to be anywhere.

"Sit tight, Mr. Preston. Mr. Edwards can you take this key and go ahead and get those cuffs off him. I'll be right back. I need to unclog this road real quick."

What can be known can be known for certain. What cannot be known cannot be known. One thing that is known for certain is that the deputy made a significant miscalculation when he left his traffic post to attend to Rodger. To add to his mounting problem was the fact that he must not have thoroughly reviewed the parade order. If he had, he most certainly would not have done what he did next.

"I'm going to go ahead and route this backed up traffic line downtown to head north on Short Mountain Rd and make an official detour right hand turn to proceed to Public Parking #3. I need to clear this section of the parade route for the Haddox High Junior Marching Band. I hear the band just north of downtown now. Over."

Had he reviewed the parade route and schedule, he would have known that that block of N. Short Mountain Rd. was already reserved for the Caregivers Calvary, a local equine therapy charitable organization. They were 275 strong this year.

Had he reviewed the parade route and schedule, he would have known that the Caregivers Cavalry and the Mule Skidders Group ride out in front of the Junior Band.

This is an issue of some contention. On the one hand, putting the equine groups out front makes a messy march for the rest of the paraders.

On the other hand, putting the equine groups out front significantly lessens the stress on the horses and mules. The organizers have learned from parades past that hemming the equine groups in between the bands and the hot rods makes the younger animals very nervous, which makes them far less predictable. They needed their own out front space to ensure the safety of all the animals and the parade-goers.

Had he reviewed the material he was supposed to review, he would have known that the parade was much closer than he knew. He was making detour plans based on the assumption that the band, which he could hear, was the first section of the parade. He had no idea that was about to route the Colonel's Car Club that was waiting patiently on Main St directly into the oncoming Caregivers Cavalry, which occupied the immediate two sections in front of the oncoming Haddox High Junior Band.

"My mind got the better of me, Lonnie. I thought I was—I was just trying to be proactive and help. And my mind got the best of me."

"Why did you spray the extinguisher?"

"I got nervous and started hyperventilating and when I pulled the thing off the wall the pin caught. It was like a grenade going off. I tried my best to contain the spray with my body, but it ended up all over me and the 200 Hall."

"Lord have mercy."

"Once it started, I couldn't stop it. It was like a geyser. I did the only thing I could think to do. Made my way to most immediate door. It was taking my oxygen away, so I kept spinning in circles, thinking if I would keep my nose and mouth out in front of it, I could breathe."

"Lord have mercy—"

"I'm so sorry—"

"Hold that thought, Roge. Something ain't right. This fool is routing the parade back into itself. Come on, Rodger. We gotta do something. Here stand up. Let me get them cuffs off of you."

"No, Lonnie. Leave them on. I need help."

"Do what?"

"I'm in River Grove, Lonnie. At a parade in River Grove."

"Not really. Now come on. The Colonel's Car Club is about to run smack into the Caregivers Cavalry on Short Mountain. It'll be mayham."

"Not really? What do you mean not really?"

"Not really. You're in New South Oakton. Look

around you."

"I did. I seen the signs. I seen the deputy's badge. You were right all along. I must have lost my mind years ago. I seem so normal to me, though."

"Not really. I wasn't right, well not exactly. I was just being cantankerous when I told you that because I really didn't care to talk to anyone at the time and I thought by putting on like I am known to do, you'd think I was too crazy to carry on a conversation with and you'd would go away."

"Well that backfired. I love you like a granddad, Lonnie. Like a human baby. Everything else you said was lucid, I just let it go."

"I know. I'll explain it to you later. Old Timers Day weekend is like a history festival of sorts, or a renaissance festival. You know, where a group of people get together and create a make-believe world for the real world festival to take place in?"

"Okay. Yeah, Okay. I'm following you. So, I'm not crazy?"

"River Grove is like that. Naw, Rodger. You're weird as the day is long, but you are of sound mind. Now come on. If we can cut off the Caregivers Cavalry, we can divert the whole section down Mulberry and around the oncoming hot rod section and into the parking lot near there."

"How we going to get out in front of a bunch of hot

rods?"

"Oh they're moving slow. It ain't the motion so much as the noise that's liable to send them horses kicking and jumping in every direction."

Rodger got up to his feet and took off after Lonnie, who was pretty swift for a man his age.

"Lonnie, get these cuffs off me."

"Coming."

Lonnie got Rodger free right in front of the Haddox County Co-op and Feed Store where a group of Future Farmer kids were playing cornhole and selling raffle tickets for a four-wheel drive Dickson side-by-side ATV.

"Lon, let me see them keys."

"Rodger, we can't. It's for a good cause."

"We're just gonna borrow it, Lon. We'll bring it back before the raffle even starts. They won't even notice."

"Think you can hotwire it?"

"Lon, there's a lot you don't know about me. Yes. I know so."

The fellows took off in no time flat. And Rodger was right. No one noticed a thing.

"Gun it. Then cut over Hatchford Memorial Bridge."

"Done. We'll be there in 3 minutes. We got time. Tell me real quick about this River Grove idea. 'Cause for a minute back there, I thought I was lifelong loony."

The Festival of Fools: A Resolution?

THE IDEA COMES FROM the Medieval Festival of Fools. During the Medieval Period of European History, many of the western Kingdoms celebrated the beginning of the Spring/Summer season with the Festival of Fools. The Kingdoms would decorate their common bazaar spaces with novel décor. They'd give the township a temporary Festival Name. They'd adopt a new, temporary calendar. They'd adopt character personas that were different, most of time polar opposite, from their real personas. In some documented cases, they'd make up new religions and give God a new name. The old God, the real God, would then be played by a citizen of the Kingdom. In short, everything was turned upside down. The King became a serf. The wealthy land baron became a beggar. The warrior became a poet. Children were often tasked with making adult, governmental decisions in the make-believe kingdom. Scribes would document the event and spin yarns to entertain themselves the rest of the year.

The favorite stories from the previous year would be told in the Festival taverns the following year. Attendance by every citizen was mandatory.

"So once a year, in a make-believe Kingdom, a whole society (and in some cases neighboring societies) of real people would set everything aside to play dress-up and make-believe with their fellow citizens.

"Up here take the next left on Faulkner Alley and park this thing behind Big Littleton's Tire shop. I have an idea."

"Can do. So what about River Grove?"

"At the very first Old Timers Day Parade and Lying Contest, Jebediah Taylor and a few others decided that it would be in the best interest of the event if everyone dressed up and played a character during the Lying Contest."

"Why?"

"Well, Mr. Taylor knew the newspaper would be there and he didn't want anyone to mistake his participation in the event with his having to execute his duties as mayor. He didn't want to be misquoted in the paper during an election year."

"Makes sense."

"Opie and Ethel McArtry took it one step further when they suggested that such a thing could happen to anyone, not just the mayor. So they purposed that everyone who wanted to participate ought to play a character

too. All day if they wanted to. Then somebody, and it's a matter of debate exactly who, suggested they ought to introduce a proposal to the City Council and the County offices to temporarily suspend the city charter and turn the whole place into a city-wide, unincorporated township for the long Old Timers Day weekend festival."

"How do I not know about this? I grew up here."

"Us old timers blame the internet. Lack of participation. Population decline. The automobile. There's lots of reasons, really. You ain't the only one. At last count, at the 160th Annual Old Timers Day Parade (and Lying Contest), there were only 33 citizens still keeping the old traditon alive. We have a larger turnout to the parade than we've ever had thanks to technology and advertisement. But very few people know about The Historic Township of River Grove. And…

"Lonnie! Look out! We're gonna collide with them !"

To be continued...

2

The Box:

-Collected Marginalia & Notes Regarding the 110th Annual Old Timers Day Parade

-Historical Articles about Parades

-Collected MISC. Material

[SA 05-16/4-8]

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My Father's Material

DEAR READER,

I'm not sure exactly how this document came to be. I do know that Mitch Proctor was a good friend of my grandfather. And I do know that he had a son later in his life which he named after Granddaddy. For years now, I've been editing the material that my father left behind, all the while I've been writing and adding my own in with his with the hope that someday a definitive account of the 110th Annual Old Timers Day Parade can be submitted to the archives along with Granddaddy's at the Haddox Memorial Library. My intentions were for he (my father) and I to share the credit as co-authors of the history and dedicate it to Granddaddy, since it was he who set this whole 'thing' in motion. Until I found this letter I was under the impression that Daddy had burned all of Granddaddy's material that related to the parade and the death of Mr.

McAlister. However, the document that follows makes reference to certain materials found among my father's papers that the author credits to Granddaddy. The author mentions seeing first hand a variety of early drafts in Granddaddy's box which sound remarkably similar to Daddy's. And since I have studied for years very closely a variety of my grandfather's histories in the library archives, I am very familiar with his writing style. I'm also very familiar with Daddy's. They are very different. Very very different. So different in fact that it hardly seems plausible that they share the same writing DNA. But they did. Lord, they look just alike. But any half-literate person could see the differences in the two men's style. My father's was erratic, unorganized, needlessly digressive, and basically dismissive of the rules of grammar. Granddaddy's was clear, concise, well-organized, and very thorough. Master of the obit and eulogy. Granddaddy was a mathematician with words, Daddy a drunk poet. But it's never occurred to me before to compare the writing styles of the various documents in the box that my father left me. I took it for granted that they all came from his hand. I was told nothing of Granddaddy's exists outside the library archives, told all his papers were either burned or turned over to be bound and stored. However, upon my discovery of this document among some of Daddy's unrelated material, all of my assumptions about the event have been

altered. I'm not so concerned with the fact that my father may have claimed some of Granddaddy's material as his own. That fact has little effect on my opinion of my father as a historian. However, it does affect my perception of the event. I have been working under the assumption that my source material was at least three degrees of separation away from first-hand accounts of the event. In other words the story has been filtered through the people who told the people who Granddaddy spoke with over the years and made records of, which were studied by my father who in turn made his own records and interviews which I have studied and made my own records and notes to supplement. If in fact some of the materials which I thought were my father's are actually the products of my grandfather's lifetime of work. I am that much closer to the source material, the original story. I have no idea when or why this letter was written. I know it was written during a period when Granddaddy got sidetracked with other histories and is said to have misplaced his box of notes on the parade. The author mentions a few times the box is missing. But the author here (Mitch's son named after Granddaddy) also mentions seeing the contents of the box around the time that Granddaddy got the false alarm with his heart and he was convinced the doctors were crazy and that he was certainly going to die within days, so he called everybody he knew in to his hospital

room one by one to tell them his life story, to make sure he was remembered by history. That was Granddaddy's greatest goal they said. To be remembered a hundred years after he was gone. A hundred years at least. This author mentions both periods, so I have no frame of reference in reference to my grandfather's life and acquaintances to date this piece. The document sheds very little light on the mystery surrounding the event that lead to the death of Mr. McAlister… Merel Gene that is. It brings us no closer to a definite answer. It may be many generations before we know for sure. But it gives me reason to believe that I am in possession of some of the original research material. For that reason alone I must reassess all existing material while I'm still young and have the time and energy. Despite the fact that the document that follows is, in my own opinion, overly wordy, digressive in places, a bit repetitive, and overall a tedious read, I am including it here strictly for its historic value. It feels like a rough draft that the author meant to edit (heavily) but never got a chance to. And I can't answer how Granddaddy, or Daddy for that matter, got a hold of it. Never mind that, we'll never know for sure. But feel free to skim through it or skip over it for now and come back to it after you've gained a more thorough knowledge of the event and the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of Merel Gene McAlister. Or read every word of it straight through, even better… it

Narrative Authority?: Problems in Historical Writing

There are at least three whole versions, as far as I can remember, that Edwards lugged around in that box and talked about for all those years. Even though he almost forgot the others belonged to him in his younger days, and he tried damn hard to forget these too. But as we know now (or will come to know soon), he never did forget any of them, the three I remember at least…

1. The original copy version that was never published, which he turned in a second copy of, edited of course, to his boss not two weeks after he got back from the first trip;

2. The first-person version written in his notes between his second and twenty-seventh research trips back to River Grove, the one nearly abandoned after being deemed 'un-complete-able' by his reluctant peers; and

3. The much later transcript version (or maybe it was two parts of two transcript revisions of the collected & related materials not intended for inclusion in the final

draft of the early transcripts, which isn't a far cry to assume, knowing what we know now about the troubles Edwards encountered in his attempts to complete the document) of the tales he told into his recorder over the years there, as the voices in Thelma's Lunch Box mingled in with his own half-assured ever-aging rasps, together with the analog choruses of his pasts and would-be futures (his speculations) whipping and crackling over the hum and sizzle of Thelma's griddle that hot third-Saturday-in-May morning, and each hot third-Saturday-in-May morning after in River Grove— and even the echoes of those mornings before he arrived.

I'm fairly certain there were others, though. This missing box in question (just marked ***PARADE*** on top in black permanent marker) was too big for there not to be others, ones perhaps even he had forgotten about (or could only vaguely recall on good days)— or maybe it was just filled with duplicate revisions of the same re-revised sections stacked over and over on top of one another (again and again) from across his years of visits here (and there)… each slightly different from the others in tense and ordering and tone and form— origin and function remaining to the time and place so long as they (the sketches themselves, regardless of medium or mode of transcription) are kept within the contents which were once inside the copy-paper box marked ***PARADE***. The

tapes too, so long as they remain.

And perhaps he tried other names on other boxes of other sketches. But this is the tale of the missing box marked ***PARADE***. Not a thing more. Some years he would go five times. Some just once. But every year after that first year without fail he went to River Grove for more research. Not that any one year or revision could be deemed 'distinguishable' or 'separable' or 'more informative' than the others in the missing box. Just that each sketch had a purpose and a place all its own within the whole. That's all. But he never dated a single page. Never titled a single section definitely. So no one can ever know what the book was suppose to look like, or even does look like, supposing it still does/did exists. And he doesn't seem to care either way, or didn't while we were with him at his first death, so to speak. Because most likely he knew all along it would all go away someday. All of it, whole to itself. Gone. Gone perhaps even before it was ever started completely.

But that doesn't mean a thing to us now, to any of us here in this humble engagement. It didn't to him. We don't need to see it, touch it, smell or taste it to know without slightest doubt that it had life inside it. Some one said life is motion. And what was in that box moved. But it don't matter if it's here or not. No Sir! We already know it existed, even if just in his mind, which is enough here to satisfy

our present causes. To celebrate life.

Through us (readers) the life of his work-project on 'The American South' still lives on in a long-gone unwritten book about a parade. Never mind that non-book now though, or the parade. Let's talk about a life. Just know that for the last 48 years of his life Lonnie Edwards (the elder) lugged that thing around for a reason all his own to know, but for us just the same. He did it for us. Spent his days talking about trying to find the exact number of ways he could tie the whole string of notes and artifacts and tapes and recollections and premonitions and what-have-you's together with one definitive final movement into a knot that he could show us and we'd understand what happened to Merel Gene at the 110th Annual Old Timers Day Parade—

—All of it together at once, in one sitting, in the natural order of its whole… interlocking the threads, smash it into one fresh ream of ethnographic myth-proof: scientific, historic-written, oral-telling-told-will tell, perhaps Newtonian-observational-physical proof that it could be done: that it could be taken out of the box whole and set loose to stand on its own mythological-history-truth foundation in the flex and pull of a magnetic planet, and cast a shadow further than any man or group could see. The whole life of the ***PARADE*** was the only way to explain the death of one man. You have to know the whole

history of life in this place to know exactly what happened to Merel Gene McAlister, he said to my dad and me as he continued on about the folks who were present or at lease alive during the parade where the old man died. It was the only way to know it, to tell it all (everything) from the very beginning… and he did his best. And no doubt, until the day he put it away for good, his last day here in this hell home waiting room for death, he believed it could be done— that he could finish recording the entire local heritage he set to record in ***PARADE***, and so solve the mystery of Merel Gene's death, finishing, knowing from the heart the customs, the rituals, the human emotions and the lifeless facts of its… his, River Grove's, the parade's… time and place.

Even when they moved him into the Home here on Main St. for the elderly, The Old Olive Branch, they let him keep it under his bed and take it out when he felt the need to stir up old emotive memories: victories and pain, lemon tea after salt-cured ham, the heaviest air in fifteen counties on parade weekend, the diner, the boy born a man atop a stack of tales in the Old River Grove library that year the freak ice storm nearly canceled the parade, the front page news of his record of live birth, the spigot on the square long rusted in the heavy air, the crowds along Cardinal St, the marching band, the clowns, the songs, the candy, the kids, the memorials, the gone-too-

soons, the regional books of the dead remembered, the parade bringing thoughts of his own life and death— and make his final revisions. Or take it out just to look at the top there where he had scribbled in black magic marker decades before the tentative title of the first draft: ***PARADE***. A title he never intended on making permanent, he didn't think at the time. Someone, one of the orderlies most likely, found him an old left-over tape deck from a junk sale so he could playback again those old immutable hiss-and-snarls, strands of whispers and laughs, to make sure his final transcripts of the Hi-8s were accurate: forty-eight years, maybe more, of chromatic voices trying desperately to talk over and at times surrender to the others: themselves each a semitone apart. Some days all at once he would read the notes, listen to the tapes, look at the pictures, and think back to all the parades he had once seen turn down Cardinal Street, cross Hatchford's Memorial Bridge, cut up by Mark'n'Rita's en route to Haddox Square, circle, and head back through River Grove. Some days he would stare out the window like he was waiting for the band leader to turn the corner at Maple and Main and head his way. But what can be concluded from a stare? At that age or any there is no fixed mind in the wondering eyes at the parade. The kids can't ever sit still. The adults struggle for a vantage point despite the fact that they may be obstructing another's view. No way to be sure not a

thing was (or will ever be) missed. The elderly become bent on recognizing someone they may have known in an earlier life. I'm not sure what they at The Branch did with that old box after they buried Lonnie's ashes by the river like he had once asked of my father, anticipating he would be the first to pass on. Not back in the city where he was born. Down there where he had learned to feel at home. I'd been gone from The Grove (well Oakton in my case) for years when I heard he died. They may have burned it and buried the ashes with him. I'm not sure anyone knows for sure, except maybe a few folks who are long gone now (that was decades ago). Surely they're gone, surely they're in the ground in the ashes with Lonnie. Wherever it is, if it's even still intact as ashes and still is of this world, the box they said went missing, I'm sure Lonnie would be fine with it (however much of it remains as ashes or yellowed and bleeding copy pages on an archive shelf) in that place… wherever that might be. He knows where it is. Always will. You see, as important as I'm making it seem (the box to Lonnie) the contents (and the box itself)… each was just an intuition about a story he'd planned on writing for years— years before— but never got around to it. They say he told it ('and believe me he did,' Dad said) a thousand times a year no less— but never got around to putting it all together in one definitive capstone, a hard life's work complete, the persistent scrapbooker's last page.

He became part of the people he set to record and so forgot he even needed to finish a story that he was now a part of. He finished many in his life, but the one he left unfinished he said was his best, because he learned it so well he couldn't write it I'd guess if it were up to me. Learned stories don't need finishing. The naïve ethnographer becomes unaware of his own innate mannerisms, an outsider inside looking in on himself. A half-artist at the helm of a ship bound for a new-old world, bound to make it his own, never realizing he was already there. And that was his pipedream to believe he could at first, go somewhere no one has ever been before. But it isn't my place here, in hindsight, to think that his life was ill-spent on worn-out tales about nothing of the place not his own, not his home, not his body's designed entry into life… but his sanctuary just the same. Like all people en route to actualization, in time he learned from his mistakes that those un-trod upon places don't exist.

And the missing box just marked ***PARADE*** was just a tattered, copy paper box marked ***PARADE***. No doubt most of us have overlooked a hundred like it before in some family member's attic or storage shed, maybe a junk store. One marked **GRANNY'S DISHES** or **PAW-PAW'S ODDS & ENDS**. To Lonnie that box really wasn't anything more than 56 pounds of clutter he'd have gladly done away with if there had been a better way to

make record of it all in his time and place before massive digital data storage. He valued it, the box, only for its abilities AND its failures to remind him (conjure up in him the old proverbial voices, or forget them to think about the future) of those memories that he had sworn to remember when he was a young man: the pact: continue crafting resilient vessels for life outside the body— but on everyone's mind just the same. Happily he did. And surely he knew that vessel would float in time. At times not. Sink like boulders in the sea. Surely he knew it could be patched. Repainted. And in some cases completely replaced and sent into an early retirement if need be. The Old Merism of Life, another like him may have called it, the box. And the next like artist The Southern Belle's Revenge. Wasted Time! A Life in Writing on the High Seas. Like an old galleon, so to speak. The Bread and Butter. Or just Look at Who We Are: The Story of Us through Life. Call it what you will, Lonnie just called it 'a small story I never got around to writing.' In any case, it was to remind him that in all its unorganized and unfinished contents the box had given him a life to work at, something to pass the time (otherwise why would he have kept at it so long, and lugged that thing around for all those years?). A thing to carry it in. That's all. The bare essentials for his life on Earth. And everyone said his friends said but Lonnie it's only a small-town parade in some boondock town in The

South… so what. There are millions of different parades in the world, most of which are probably far more eventful and fun than that one you've been researching for all these years, these are all better: Mardi Gras, Macy's, Carnival, all better… I'm sure somewhere in the world at this very moment a better parade is about to begin. Why parade-watching? Parade-writing? Why don't you give that stuff up; get yourself a real hobby, take a real vacation with your real friends and real family? But that's what he was doing, let me tell you. And so there may well have been. They could have been right. Maybe a parade was about to begin. Somewhere. Maybe. Good chance they were always right about these things.

But—Lonnie having kept no secret from his friends and family and his colleagues and orderlies about lugging that box around for nearly a half-century, kept no secrets of his modest intentions, and 56 lbs. of anything doesn't fit easy into hidden coat pockets— they could only say things like these things truthfully because they'd never heard of this little ***PARADE***, or this forgotten town called River Grove, ever. Never heard of it. They only saw the outside of the box before it went missing, overheard small-talk about all that was said to be inside it— never read it for themselves. Even if there had been time, there wouldn't have been enough time to take it all in in a handful of sittings before Lonnie would have added to it or

taken something, some story-piece, away from it… and so adding either way simultaneously to the doubling girth of the mystery of his haphazard approach: the mounting tower-load of frustration that builds instinctively when the plan turns to resolving the disparate acts of life on the move (where does life go when we blink?) regardless of how epic in scale and precocious Lonnie's efforts may have seemed in the end (looking at the outside of the box near the end of his life: its serious bulk evident in the middle bulge of its bending bottom), he maintained his entire life that he was only 'working on a small story, no more than a couple typed pages about a parade when it's done, that's all.' His first intentions for the outcome were as modest as the day he wrote his final charge; the last day when, for good, he put the box away: "After all the years of epic fuss I'd experienced writing ad copy and history in bulk (you know, overcoming the problem of establishing time and place in a piece in a place I'd never spent any time with or in, working day in and day out between four burnt bisque-colored cubicle walls to produce original copy, struggling to find a sense of the living root from the 11th floor of my electric high-rise I hail from no longer), I just wanted to tell the story the way it was told to me. I wasn't interested in cataloging all the mundane lists of life. Objects out of rhythm. Not interested in exploring every tangent and digression of the anxious human mind. Not

interested in critiquing any one particular existential polemic theory of history or social-motivation model of dead languages, bygone religions: ancient or newborn. I'm not interested in high-brow zoo pageantry or secret societies on the verge of intergalactic treason, world governments converging for a summit near the equator. I'm not into muckraking or finger-pointing. No schemata. No politics to speak of. I'd done these things for too long while I was working in ad copy, and interestingly enough it was ad copy that took me there, to that simple place after all. My repulsion from it sent me into my own half-obsessive-half-repulsive tendencies, and back again to that state of rest, flux and sway. A digression into would-be worlds, worlds no one had ever seen. I wanted to take a deep breath and say it all at once. Let it take my breath away. I just wanted to tell the story the way it was told to me. No charts. Wanted to get it right. I promised myself I'd never write a word of the final draft until I could tell its entirety to myself from memory, like They had. That way I could hear the thread cut loose, where the silence breaks, where I lose touch with its history and mythology and fail to see where it will end, if that were its so-called fate, to end without my knowing it and begin again, improvised but whole, evolving constantly still, simple as a wheel. My intentions for the outcome were modest: A story about a town with a parade: A story about real men

and women, boys and girls: No heroes or villains. No plot arc. Life isn't plotted for effect. I wanted a birth and a death. I wanted people to wake up in the morning, and I wanted people to have suitable dreams. I wanted people to die in their sleep. I wanted people to laugh. Eat. Drink. Get addicted. Get redeemed. Learn from one another. I wanted family photos on the wall. A mountain. A dinner bell. A river. Things my father grew up with. I wanted technology to be innately at odds with tradition, yet reach an understanding just the same. A clown. A song. A dance. I wanted at least one flower and one bird, even if one of the two had to die. And I wanted not to turn away from the War in the periphery, so big it's out of sight. Because regardless of time and place or number of people killed (1 or a billion), war is just too big to reenact or turn away from. I wanted to be heartbroken for the sake of the heartbroken. I didn't want to be famous, but not anonymous. The mega stars reenact war stories for entertainment. Their hearts are not broken. If no one sees it to learn from it- it isn't a broken heart. It's a disease. I wanted to be healthy with my broken heart. I didn't want to be the popular media reporting live on the scene: the scripted scene: dank vacuums meant for storing traumatic fragments of dying emotion or a heightened sensitivity to bright light, necessarily a place not fit for a shadow, a life or rhythm— necessarily a place always wholly filled with violent electrons colliding: static and frantic noises and

pretty lights invading, indicators of levels of impending doom and approval ratings, no hearts to be broken there, not fit for silence and love, nothing to be mended by the hard-earned endurance of love. Mended by love. That's what I wanted most of all for the heartbroken at the parade, in the little town of River Grove. That's what I wanted most of all: Love. I never imagined (people called me crazy) it would be nearly a half-century before I'd learn what happened to Merel Gene McAlister and write the first (and only) few pages of the first and final draft."

But that's what they believed, that Lonnie had lost his mind, when fifty or so years after the case was closed and Merel Gene's death ruled undetermined he started screaming down the Alzheimer's Hall, I know what happened!, I know why Merel Gene was out at the parade. They thought he'd lost his mind; none of the young orderlies had ever heard of all the mystery deaths in the Old Timers Day Parade, especially this one. Heck, at that time the parade may not have even been anymore. They thought he'd done gone crazy for good. Because that's what the box looked like from the outside to folks that didn't (or hadn't yet) put the effort into learning what Lonnie knew then and felt (or would come to know and feel over time) about the folks in the now-missing box marked ***PARADE***— and folks at other parades, and in other boxes. It looked like a life's worth of accumulations of a man out of mind. One of the junk boxes of a crazy

man… something filled with something of truth on paper about this ***PARADE***'s place among history's parades, blah blah blah. Ooohhh, they tease folks that believed what Mr. Edwards was doing was important, and maybe he had other boxes with other histories and other parades that've gone missing too. And maybe just the one, I say. Maybe. Maybe the biggest parade in the universe was in there, to him, and maybe just a diagram of the ordering of some tiny local procession not worth the paper it's printed on. Maybe. But Lonnie never talked about any other parade other than the one in the box marked ***PARADE***, as far as I heard that day. It wasn't that he was so interested in parades necessarily. Just the one there in River Grove, and only it because of the life it gathered. It could have well been any other parade really, but he never outright said that. But let me tell you, it wasn't because he couldn't talk about any of the other annual parades (perhaps ones within a grander cycle) in the world, or grander… the variety of parades that mankind has enacted to serve one community function or another, whether religious or triumphal or what. He had done his research no in the beliefs of an ever-changing truth, i.e. reading a book about love, reading about a book about love being written. The lists of godheads grow ever-longer, congruent with ego. But doubt over the years, but he never talked about it. Because he thought talking about places and times he hadn't

seen didn't leave much room for the things he had seen in his own life, and that he had might as well work for a history textbook company, an ad agency, or a Thislife website. Something copy related. If he wanted to write about stuff he ain't seen with his own heart and eyes. It would have given the same instant satisfaction, just different office hours. But no lasting hobby to pass the time, just work. This precisely is why it's so important to mention, either now or later, so long as we mention it: the fact that he'd done all those years of research, which is not so important for its facts so much as its myths, and the fact that he never talked and rarely wrote a word about any of those other parades he hadn't been to. And yet, they are all there in the box somehow… behind notes, behind revisions, behind voices on tapes, behind sizzles in the backgrounds, behind even his own self-conscious, half-improvised voice on the fringes of local conversation. Behind everything. Every single one of them, the same. Like his. Why they're important too: like those behind, his is still in mid-march in hot May sounding out in time signatures, like parades in history, still alive in the heart's jubilee. [Speaker Pause: Audience catches up]

Of course… it could have been something else all together that kept him from ever filling every little second of air with bleats and chatter of data, as was tempting of the atmosphere of the era; kept him from making cultur-

ally voided assertions like: *Ceres? See Roman Ag Rite. Search. Ambarvalia. ambio. I go round.* Matter-of-fact foot notes, references to the grand body of old ceremony and ritual. Classic Allusions: so-called Knowledge. Illusions. Not a body itself. A nod toward yonder, what yonder?, here yonder?, there yonder?, her yonder?, my yonder?, his yonder?, our yonder?, I've yondered too long, and now that yonder is gone. My loss. Not even sure what that means to anyone these days. Over yonder. Makes you wonder what knowledge really is and why some people even talk about it, and why some won't. It could have been nothing. Some people are just quiet. Some people just stay sharp on the fringes of conversation, smoking no-filter cigarettes and eating apple fritters. If you happened to pull a word or piece of advice out of them, someone like Lonnie if he were around, it would be something like, "Don't sew your sleeves up in a blizzard." And it would leave you wondering, wanting to know more, wanting to read on just a bit further into them stories in hopes of finding the answer buried behind something they almost said and stopped and didn't finish, but you finish their thoughts for them in your own mind, and then you stop and start to wonder about yours and not theirs and why isn't it a good idea to sew your sleeves up in a blizzard?

For Lonnie's sake— (since his biggest hold-up in writing the whole thing was assuming everyone could see the

subtle nuances in human behavior which hint that we, in fact, may not be distinct voices after all and so have no need to write at all, and nothing need be much longer than a few pages, if that) — let me tell you the histories and mythologies he undoubtedly knew. Let me recall a few lines from his life and others he'd been inspired by, share a sample of his favorite quotations and a few unknowns, and a few from his own dreamy past recollections on the nature of the parade. Let me share with you, friends, his mine and ours: the related materials, and *PARADE* itself. Why? Why not skip all that stuff and just say: a man named Lonnie Edwards got sent to do a story in The American South, found himself at a local diner engaging the locals, fell soft to the humid allure of the old place, quit his job and spent the rest of his life trying to write a story about his time there but never did, the end? Why not tell you what happens to Lonnie and his story? Why not tell you his story like a story is suppose to be told: beginning, middle, end, conflict, resolution, character histories, etc.? Because if you weren't from River Grove (the setting of ***PARADE***)— if you had never been to River Grove (it is unique in itself, none like it, the Web says now that everyone remembers it after having once forgotten it)— had you'd been raised even just one mile outside the River Grove line… Lonnie's story of the telling of the story wouldn't make a bit of sense to you,

or them— him telling it loud and fumbling and excited like he would every time without fail, like he was trying to tell his own versions to everyone, tailored specifically to them, all at the same time, even while the men and women were first telling him the story the very first time he stopped to eat at Thelma's. Besides, why not? Plot and character development and conflict and resolution and all that would be boring in this case, not all cases, but this one. You'd never keep reading, you'd never know what on earth me and Lonnie Edwards and the rest of 'em here are talking about. That's why we can't skip it. See, Lonnie thought right away he'd heard it all before, but he had to have a mediator, or three, or however many it took on any given trip to remind him how to retell it to himself before he retold everyone else to make sure he had all the right voices in the right places; and he knew exactly when to shut up and let the silence do the talkin'. Because he thought he'd heard it before. And he didn't understand either at first, because he wasn't from River Grove either. He was an outsider. And since you're not from River Grove, nor am I, you and me are just like Lonnie Edwards was in the beginning of the story, the first time he went to the South: Lost. That's not to say it would be your fault (or his or mine) for not understanding and getting lost. I wouldn't either, and would be lost right along with you, if I were you. Him too. And I'm not you or him, and still I

don't. We'll confuse each other from time to time in life, mistake what we heard behind the sound of the griddle cooking Dixie Eggs in some local diner, maybe we'll hear Lonnie say something he never said on the tapes, when you're done reading misquote him just a bit. Maybe his ghost whispering will correct you and record your conversation. Play it back a thousand times, and still we'll disagree and not understand the phonetic intentions of the chromatic ghost phonemes in the playback, as they swirl into the echoing closets of our inner ears and sprinkle our brains with private-but-somewhat-shared meaning. Had I not seen what I seen when I seen it, or you what you've most likely seen in your day, we might not ever agree on a single thing Lonnie says, but that's not to say we won't understand one another just the same. That's just to say that no one knows how your hometown parade story goes better than you do. Simple as that. And if by some chance it needs retelling and you're not around to retell it, which often is the case in today's flux of the information sway, assuming you like to tell good stories too like Lonnie and me, wouldn't you want the next best woman or man or child or telling artifact to tell it for you exactly how you would? Wouldn't you want them to tell a version of how you told the tale? Not necessarily what you told. Just how you told it. Use an old man voice when The Old Man speaks. Talk like you ain't got not one bit of a lick of

sense, then change the subject, because the sly devil is playing dumb, he's holding pocket aces, there's big cards on the river… and he's already got the rest of your money in his pocket so you better show everyone that your real face can look like a thinking one. Now that he's after your grandfather's watch you'll outsmart him, use big words on him he's never heard before. And if your story is set in a port city, wouldn't you want the main character to cuss when the sailors walk by drunk. Insinuate that some act of perversion just took place behind the words, but no one can prove it, because your story is set on a farm in Kentucky and it (the act in question) happened near dusk in a corn field— those two shadows could just as well've been a corn stalk and a scarecrow mingling together— wouldn't you use words to hint around what happened? Cornstalk scarecrow sex? Perversions. There I said it. Acts of perversion hidden behind words make for a more interesting read, if interesting is what you are going for. Wouldn't you want someone to know why it isn't a good idea to sew your sleeves up in a blizzard— if it was your story and someone said not to sew your sleeves up in a blizzard? Well, that's what they said Lonnie was trying to say about what he was hoping to say and do with ***PARADE***: experience it enough to re-retell it when those who retold it were gone. Plans for the future. When it's gone, the future. Not for the sake of anyone who was ab-

sent at the time or long gone either, but for the place and the parade: the time itself. For the lessons taught there by the locals and the guests, those not learned easy in a day but tryingly over the long hands of time. Figuratively speaking, in this story, so everyone would know why it isn't a good idea to sew your sleeves up in a blizzard.

You see, there is no more Old Timers Day Parade or such a place as River Grove anymore. Nobody celebrates it anymore. It's long been engulfed by the Greater Oakton Area's transplants. Out-of-towners without sufficient knowledge of customs of the Festival of the Fools and The Lying Contests of old. New South Oakton is known around the world for its circus, not its parade. And since I'm telling you this out of trust you'll re-re-retell my version too, I must confess now before we get too far gone and lose trust in one another and can't communicate; I may have told a bit of a fib back there about him never whispering a word about the things he knew about parades. Don't mistake me for a liar. I'm not. I was just using an exaggeration, really, just an exaggeration to draw attention to the fact that Lonnie never bragged about his wealth of novelty parade knowledge when it came to his work. Work being the key here. A big deal is made of signs of control and modesty when information is free and seemingly limitless and speculation the way of the work game nowadays. In most other areas of his life,

sure. But never in his work. When he was out carousing, sure. Never the work. No doubt he told a few close friends about the studies he'd done other than just walking around with people at a parade, or sitting in a diner all day listening to old grumpy folks ramble on about how their grandkids had washed their best cast-iron skillet in the sink over the holiday weekend and now it needs to be re-seasoned… (There's the nugget. Cast-iron can't be washed clean with conventional methods: soap, water, sponge. They have to be oiled and heated to at least 450 degrees F. The iron has to mix in the oil in its surfaces to stay black and fit to cook and eat out of). I know for a fact he engaged in a healthy mixture of both: Observation and Speculation. My dad took me to meet his best friend Lonnie Edwards when I was a young boy, the man I reminded him so much of even from the day I was born, he said. They lived together when they were at the university. Then when they graduated he and my dad, (Mitch Proctor) and my mom and sister moved to L.A. to get jobs and enjoy the California weather. Years after they graduated he took my dad to the ***PARADE***. Dad's first and only, until we moved to just outside the Oakton area when I was about grown, several years before the county dissolved the historic township of River Grove. They talked about it (me and my generation in the future at the parade) that day I met Lonnie. Dad told me that

story on the way down, after we closed on the property and hired a contractor to break our ground. Later after I'd grown into a young man he told me more. He said he (Lonnie) talked at lengths about parades like ***PARADE*** and its place in human history, but told dad not to tell a soul so he wouldn't look pretentious. And when he was nearing the end of his life, or so we thought, he called us in to see the contents: the entirety of the box. He didn't want to take the secret of Merel Gene McAlister's death to the grave with him. Turned out he was wrong. Lonnie wasn't about to die. Not even close. But most likely what we saw of the contents had all but been replaced several times over by the time his life actually did end. Because it turns out he had been wrong about Mr. McAlister the first time he called us in. New evidence came to light and changed everything, he told dad. What the story must have really been like when Lonnie actually passed, seventy some odd years ago or a few less, I can only imagine. And every time I do it becomes something new. Like every telling of the same story is never the same story. Long gone are Lonnie and Dad, but knowing Lonnie Edwards as Dad did, and told me, he probably made some notes on their trip together. So that trip is preserved somewhere. In that box probably, I believe I remember seeing something like that. But who can say, or would even care to know now. Looking back now on what he said of his

own time at the Old Timers Day Parade, I understand what Dad understood after that trip about Lonnie's motives, and so never asked his friend again: I (like he) understand why Lonnie kept going back. The story kept changing, and changing him, and he felt he was missing something— perhaps leaving things of theirs (the parade goers) behind. Even perhaps pieces of himself with them. He was becoming his own long-distance friend. He understood then too why he went, how when he (Lonnie) left the city (the place Lonnie and Dad moved to after college and remained for many years, until we finally packed up our things and went down South to be closer to the country) each time headed for River Grove… he wasn't just leaving loved ones behind to visit a strange land, he was heading toward a friend's house. Lonnie understood the need to preserve a thing not his own, some not-quite-tangible link to everyone's human heritage.

He understood that things change always, that there's an old bridge through history that leads anywhere you will it to: a transmission between chosen lives, the lives of Lonnie Edwards (the elder). But that doesn't mean they (his family and friends) didn't miss him when he was gone. And he isn't missed in ***PARADE***, or missing. But right there listening along with us. You and me. I know. Because I can't say Lonnie ever said static things

like "now that he is gone." That's how I know. Only things still in motion he says, like:

"I'm going to the river y'all, and somewhere, wherever that old box is and will be, your dad and me are still drinking sweet tea on Cardinal Street that year in downtown River Grove… watching the parade pass and pass by us."

And we are here.

-L. Evans Proctor, Sr. (Son of Mitchel Proctor, Childhood friend and later executor of L. Edward's Literary Estate, former Research Librarian at The Haddox County Memorial Library)

New South Oakton Retirement Home / The Olive Branch (on Parade weekend)

[undated]

Establishing Context: Research on Parades

For those interested in a more traditional narrative of events, skip to page […] of this text. What Follows is a series of articles written by Lonnie Edwards and others Parades. Not the Parade in question. Other parades
Thank you,
The Editors

The parade— (some may say procession in other parts of the world, and we may see a slight difference in the meaning of the two words later in this history-re-telling, but may not in Lonnie's re-re-telling, or the others)— development is impossible to describe in vast detail, or at least to the detail Lonnie would have known of ***PARADE***. I can't know how much he knew, but on that trip Dad said he seemed to have no shortage of accounts on others in the world, and what they all mean to their own time and place. It suffices to say IT here how he told me, like Lon-

nie told him: they, the parades, THE PARADE, [1 See note later. Lonnie I wrote this quote on the underside of the box top. He meant to keep it. Read it once a day at least, while he was there working on it. See Dennis' works on parades] ***PARADE*** are all significantly engrained into the oldest records of even the earliest and most primitive societies. And parades like ***PARADE*** and others have not lost (but in most cases gained overwhelmingly in magnitude) an inch of importance to some in the community to this day. In fact, for many cultures they do most of the informing. Whatever ceremonial [Lonnie would say historic-linguistic here instead of ceremonial, in the early years] function they may play in that community, or if there's even any definitive record of the people and their customs at all, is subject to historic interpretation.

However, there are a set of universal, taxonomically immutable functions that parades play regardless of place or time [consider revising. Probably an exaggeration. Wordy at least] Let's consider a few of them now. This will provide us with a working context so that we may better understand the Old Timers Day Parade:

—When Cleopatra took to the waters to join into her Mr. Anthony she whispered, Mark Anthony you will know what I've come for when my fleet arrives before me. You will know even before you see them by the per-

fume I built my vessel of that it is me. *So historians agree that the parade was used as an early form of grand arrivals.* Though Cleopatra's be a procession over the water, no doubt we must consider it among those in the history behind ***PARADE***. We do, after all, still today make our floats the primary aesthetic focus of any parade. And they are still used **to mark the arrival of some grand someone or something another** .

—At precisely 9am EST every Thanksgiving Day since 1924 in Manhattan (without fail, excluding War), the second oldest parade in US history makes its way through the center of The New World, New Babylon, New Amsterdam they once called it, old NYC. By the 30s the annual crowd had grown to over 1 million. That decade they would add their second balloon/float. A Mouse. The first, naturally, was a cat several years before. Felix, I believe. A decade later it would be postponed to fight the Germans. Another game of cat and mouse. And when the fighting was over, the parade began again. That year Hollywood made a movie featuring actual footage of the event. The United States had just won the war and everyone was looking for a Miracle in the Streets. Those early days were in fact, they say, miracles. And by the middle of the Twentieth Century, regardless of its official name, the world knew it by its maiden: The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. But this is just a late example of what parades had

already been doing for centuries: **advertising the institutions of a culture on a grand scale and celebrating the end of war.**

—A devout human word is devout human word, no matter the language the word first finds itself in, or whether it'll ever be heard. For over 25 years the Shah of Iran delayed his rightful ascension to the throne, a proper coronation. He had taken a vow not to be crowned until his land could stand on its own. The land had been pressed thin, unable to bring life to the people. The pressures of such a life: a male heir still absent from the palace halls, the jewels all pawned or snatched away, the British-American-Socialistic oil coups, the assassination attempts, the temporary exiles. When it was made known his Second Queen Consort's infertility, despite her public statements about her devout beliefs in the sanctity of marriage, Queen Soraya of Iran announced that she would grant the Shah a divorce, so that he may have a male heir like his father had. François Meiland, a French rose breeder, bred a rose in her honor: The Empress Soraya, he called it. Soon to remarry, the Shah found his male heirs in a young lady name Farah Pahlavi— which her future role as Empress (Shahbanou) had been contingent upon. She would prove to be highly influential on the Shah, and the health of the land. So in 1967, more than twenty-five years after his accession to the Peacock Throne, the Shah held his Coronation. The Coronation

Carriage was pulled through the city, the military, the royal music-makers, the flag-wavers, through massive gatherings of on-lookers (est. up to 4 million), up to the Great Hall by eight white Hungarian horses. The Coronation Procession (parade in other parts of the world) now stands as a symbol not of only his successes and failures— but of hers. In that same year, amendments were made to the Iranian constitution allowing a woman (the first Empress in the 2,500 year history of Persia) to be regent in case of the Shah's death. It would all be hers. A second crown had to be made. **So grand cortèges (parades) can serve as indicators of governmental and ideological change.** The Shah couldn't have known that by keeping his vow (though serving the sanctity of marriage in the process), he would play a small hand in a victory for women in the Middle East. The double-edged sword in retrospect, The Ayatollah. But all was not in vain. Farah would go on to establish programs aimed at saving Iran's precious historical artifacts: works of art and literature. But as history tells us, like most great women of influence, unfortunately, she too would become an exile in her own land. It is this sequence of events, looking back upon the history now that makes this era in Iranian heritage so heartbreaking and victorious... all at once. Had the vow not been taken, the Coronation would have taken place nearly three decades before it did. Had there

been no lack of male heirs, the Shah would never have married his second wife. His first wife, Fawiza of Egypt, would have already given their daughter a brother to play with, and perhaps he (The Shah) and they (His last two wives) would have never met. Had there been no Farah, the Coronation, perhaps, would never have happened at all (as it is well document that she played perhaps the biggest role in his, and perhaps his land's, renewed vitality). Had Farah not been crowned the first Empress of Iran alongside the Shah, this victory for women world-wide may not have been possible. Had there never been a victory won, and marriages lost, no rose would have been bred for an Iranian woman without child. **So, in many ways (like the Coronation of the Shah) a parade can commemorate both the successor and the casualty of the culture it represents.**

—The boys talked Charles Lee into staying put— the Palmetto Tree make-shift fort would have to do against Peter Parker and his boat. However, as it happened (the outgunned battery re-positioned and hunkered down in the fort, the Royal Navy at a bit of a southerly angle) the fight became a contest of marksmanship. And the Royal Navy was spot on with its cannonballs. But it wasn't an oak fort, a hickory fort, a walnut fort, a pine fort, an ash fort, a maple fort, a poplar fort, or an ironwood fort. Those would splinter. It was a palmetto fort; too fleshy

and spongy for the cannonballs to do anything more than bounce off, or be absorbed and fall into the sandy ground. Sir Peter had to call off his attack. The humble tree had saved them. The day became known as Palmetto Day, marked with a festival and a parade. A symbol of national pride. But over the next half-century or so, what had been one of the most significant events to that Generation of Americans disappeared. Then suddenly (like it had been lingering behind in the minds of children then too young to understand the emotional impact the event had on the Nation when it first began) the next generation revived Palmetto Day as a symbol of regional heritage, reminding them of being at the parade as small children. A shift in meaning over time. So what do the actions in the parade mean now? We won the war outright, and bigger events took precedent in the minds of the people. Every emotional signifier has been brought into its new function (quite fluidly, really). Once again this proves the impossibility of arranging a parade, or any custom, historically, into any strict taxonomy of human behavior across time, unwavering. (Travers). "**Parades act as moving performances of the past, conjugated moments powered to nurture the myths that bind."**

—"For the most part, their emphasis was more or less conventional, linking a person, an institution, or a cause to tradition, often clichéd patriotism." (124) The official

color of the event was mustard seed yellow, and The Sound Money sang in the streets. Edgar S. Thompson caught McKinley's parade in old black & white. More than one million are rumored to have attended and stayed until the end… until the entire seven and one half hours parade had finished circling through the borough between Broadway and Fifth Avenue, before it finally headed, for the last time, up Fortieth Street past the office of the Sun (not historically geographically accurate). Everyone agreed. This had been without a doubt the finest spectacle to date in this fair city. The Sound Money. Naturally, as was common of certain eras of the past and others not— everyone was becoming suspicious of the other. "Of course, there always had been the lurking fear among the people… public marches and meetings of any kind might turn into riots." Parading in the streets not to starve. Parading in the streets not to die of hunger. Parading in the streets for lack of work, lack of freedoms, lack of resources. Things like that. Parades can take on flesh, and take up a cause— invoke in some "a city-wide fear of violence at public celebrations in the wake of the parade-turned-riot…" causing them to stay home and never go back to the parade or out into public again. Lonnie said that McNamara insinuates this is the nature of the parade. "But that's old-timey rhetoric Mitchy Boy, I found that old book in a library in Tennessee. The due-

back-by-this-date card had never been stamped. I was the first person to flip through those pages of the past. Not that I necessarily needed any particular hard-core facts from those pages— they just confirmed what I already knew to be true of parades. And they were filled with very well written sentences." Confirmed: At once they can be comfortable for some— paranoid for others**. But by no means are parades ever the same for everyone. This is true of the parade-turned-riot.**

—The Art of Understanding Nonevents, the nuts and bolts of societies on the move. Parades are both. Impossibly transient, yet still gouged into the side of a rock in Bogaz Keui.

—Four years after they hung Jesus of Nazareth on the cross†††, The Emperor Nero was born into exile (most likely due to a war on his father, started or joined into by his brothers, overseen by his mother). He lived on an Island during Caligula's rule. During his reign as Emperor of Rome— a position his mother won for him by murdering off the competition and, well, perhaps the Emperor Claudius himself— Nero became interested in the arts. He was especially fond of writing poetry and performing in plays. Performing, not conquering so much, but performing was his forte. He liked (history tells us this) to dress children up as wild beasts and pretend he was eating them in the wilderness, surviving on their flesh and

blood alone, acting out his fantasy of a more instinctual way of life. Survival of the fittest. He would arrange grand processions complete with mock feasts on the living youth, which would snake through Rome, through the crowds of people lining the Roman avenues, stopping only to make salutations toward monuments of past rulers— and finally end with a final lap around the Circus Maximus— where forming a broken semi-circle, the spectators could see the whole procession at once, beginning: middle: end: all of it— The people in the streets experienced a sense of mystery now that the whole of the procession was behind the arena walls— they not knowing what decorum may come back out of the grand arch first. But for Nero, this wasn't grand enough. It wasn't enough to see the whole procession in the company of his fellow Romans. He thought *if only I can build a palace large enough, I can end this ceremony in private.* The whole finale will be reserved for the Emperor of Rome, and The Emperor Alone, in his living room. And so there was room to be made. He wanted his palace right there right away, in the heart of it all, and it was this fault alone that caused his fall and the Great Fire (like ***PARADE***s, *Great Fires* is a fascinating subject in World History). Some say it was the Christians with their Book of Revelation that burned Rome. But Romans knew it was Nero and his lust for a private parade making room for his Palace that set fire to Rome. Suetonius via

Weir relates of an eye witness account of the event, ""… For the soldiers [Nero's] (including the night watch) with a keen eye for plunder, instead of quenching the conflagration, kindled it more… A sudden wind caught the fire and swept it over what remained. As a result nobody troubled longer about goods or homes, but all the survivors, from a place of safety, gazed on what appeared to be many islands and cities in flames."" *The world is losing its greatest artist*, Nero thought. And as his city lay before him in ruins and smoldering, he stood atop the rubble sawing away at his fiddle. Some dispute this claim. Say it was a lyre. Regardless the instrument, Rome burned. The people had all they could stand. Nero later killed himself as an assassination squad neared his fortified home. History tells us that **parades traditionally take place in public streets, and that in the few historic cases where someone has attempted to alter this phenomenon on the grand scale, there has been retaliation on the part of the people**.

—Let the good times roll, they say. In the Christian tradition, the Holy Week of Palms follows the end of Lenten Season. Participants celebrate the Epiphany of the Three Kings. The event is famously celebrated with a series of grandiose parades which make their way through the French Quarter in New Orleans. The bands play around the clock. The participants dress themselves in

brightly colored attire. Libations are plentiful. The party goes on and on. And at least since the late 1800s, it has been a tradition for onlookers and participants alike to engage in voyeuristic public de-robing in exchange for strands of assorted beads. On its surface the act may seem crude and improper; however, it stands as an example of what MM Bakhtin called *Rabelaisian Carnivalesque* behavior. Public ritual de-robing in this context is both acceptable and unacceptable. It is still against the law and at times other than during Mardi Gras still socially unacceptable; however, this sentiment is transgressed for the sake of the parade. Mardi Gras is not unlike the Medieval Festival of Fools where the rich become poor, the powerful become weak, and the slaves become masters. When the profane becomes the sacred, a community may properly assess its norms and mores. **This is true of the Mardis Gras Parade, the profane becomes the sacred.** [Note: interestingly enough it is still in bad taste to scream, "show us your tits" in the French Quarter during Mardis Gras]

—Comrade Stalin set the parade bar high across the Communist world during the 20th Century. His Victory Parade put the full might of the Red Army on display for the world to see. And the sickle and hammer was made proud. **The military parade can be an overt deterrent to adversaries and a source of nationalistic pride.**

—Tet, the short name for the period of the New Year observed in Vietnam, is marked by a week long period when adherents prepare special dishes, sing songs, travel to visit friends and family, and decorate the towns and villages. Often these public decorations take the form of a jovial foot procession highlighted with traditional fireworks and music. A Tet parade. In 1968 the leaders of the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong guerillas agreed to a cease fire with the ARVN so that each side could send its personnel home to celebrate Tet. Sources from historical intelligence reports confirm that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong guerillas used the Tet celebration to covertly maneuver arms and personnel into an attack position. The cease fire was broken and a massive offensive was launched against US forces and ARVN forces across the nation. The offensive was aimed at destabilizing military and political instillations across South Vietnam. The maneuver is historically referred to as the Tet Offensive. It is considered the most successful set of offensive maneuvers ever conducted against US Military forces, marking the one and only instance when an United States Marine Corps Air Base has been unwillingly surrendered to the enemy in battle. The battle at the Valley of Base Khe Sanh saw the deaths of nearly 3,000 American troops and upwards of 20,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. The base was eventually recaptured,

but not before the lesson of the Tet Offensive was learned. **Parades, processions, can conceal. They can serve as a distraction to onlookers.** It would be another four long years before Kissinger and Lê Đức Thọ would reach a Peace Agreement in Paris. There were no parades to mark the occasion. **The absence of a parade can mean as much as a parade itself.**

—In Downtown River Grove every year without fail on the 3rd Saturday in May, folks gather along the avenues of town to watch the Old Timers Day Parade. **It's for the health of the community.**

3

***The First Narrative Account of Lonnie Dale Edwards**, his struggles with Alcoholism, the death of his father Dale Edwards, His early career, His first company-sponsored trip to the Historic Township Known as River Grove, and How He Learned of the Death of Merel Gene McAlister at the 110th Annual Old Timers Day Parade.*

[For historical context it should be noted here that it is general consensus among those interested that Lonnie Edwards first learned of the incident from a group of gentlemen (unknown number of individuals) and a short order cook, among whom was present the 110th Annual Old Timers Lying Contest Champion, Otis [SURNAME REDACTED]]

[SB 06-35/5-9]

HL.SA.09137.α

Lonnie, I & Mitchell P. Move to Los Angeles

I don't remember the box. It isn't mine. 1334 Woodlawn Ave. Approx. 4pm

I moved today, and today… there at the bottom of my closet, I found an old box full of old junk that wasn't mine. The box: I'd say going on 10 reams worth (my closet was full and I rarely used it— so there's no telling how long it had been there). And there was already a bunch of old junk left in that closet from the previous tenants when I moved into the house— it could very well have been there when I moved in. Not that I would have noticed. More than likely it was. I suspect.

My name is Lonnie Edwards, and I have been (at times in my life) what some folks might call A Drunk. And it was heaviest when I moved in there, about six months after my dad, Dale Edwards, shot himself in his living room. He's all I could think about. Always asking why: after an eight-month battle with pancreatitis? after 3 decades of war with Columbian-grade cocaine and Tennes-

see whiskey? Why after all that? Really Dad? Really? After all the medical procedures (10 I believe in all), after all the time spent in physical therapy and rehab, after all the prayers answered for your release to come home (and we spent Christmas together trying to figure out a stable diet for what would be his new diabetic lifestyle), and after another round of surgeries, after all those that had once barely missed you (but not buddies of yours), why was it just one that did it? But… it was your bullet to do what you wanted with. I don't talk to you anymore, only think of what I would say if I did. And that's that. But…

Let me explain to you (reader) what I know about the 20th Century (and its bullets): 1950 was right in the middle of it, and on January 1st when Dad was born, Granddad shot his dad's rifle once into the froze-still Tennessee air to commemorate the birth of his second son. Then he spent the next four days, which he took time off work to do, looking for that bullet, which he never found— an odd old tradition of the Edwards family. Not finding it must have been some kind of omen back then.

In Middle TN, during those days, you either cut wood or sang country music. If you sang country music (if that was your fortune to be rich and famous) you sang about hard-working folks having to do things like… cut wood to survive. If you sang country music, chances are you didn't live in Middle Tennessee, but in the middle of it—

you lived in Nashville. Music City, USA. Grand Ole Opry. WSM-AM 650. 50,000 watts. Clear as a bell. The Great Air Castle. A whole other rhinestone culture of its own. And if you cut hardwood, then you sang country music in the woods to keep yourself from thinking about the pains and the low wages you get cutting wood— you sang to forget even though the song was probably about a man and his mules skidding logs the afternoon after his Momma's funeral in the rain. Music even makes logging sound like a tolerable occupation, so long as someone writes a song about someone like you cuttin' logs. In 1950 in Middle Tennessee, there weren't very many people really like Dad's family (poor logging families) singing on the Opry— but that doesn't mean that they (poor logging families) weren't happy as morning larks to listen to them (country superstars) pretend to be like them, pretend to understand the hardships of poor country living. And if they (members of poor logging families) had it to do all over again, life, they'd pick whatever year they were born in, in whatever place it was the first time… to be born again— knowing good and well that their daddies would no doubt find and keep and cherish that bullet he would no doubt find five days after the very day they'd've picked to be born on again, if they'd've had it to do all over again too. But they don't. And like I said Granddaddy never found that bullet.

Anyway, 1950 might've been a good year to be born, if the federal government didn't get involved in the Conflict in the Republic of Vietnam several years after, like history tells us it does, and it did. Even so, at eight or nine what's there to worry with war? Not much at the time. Just that if you happen to be playing it with in the back field with hickory-stick rifles and persimmon grenades, you'd better be home before the sun goes down, else you might miss supper.

There was one other house on Luther Lane, maybe two, as far as I can remember him mentioning. In his: One brother. Two sisters. A mother and a father. A job cutting and hauling cord wood. Perhaps a friend or two: members of the family on down the lane, which may or may not bear the namesake of the lane. A home which with the exception of a few new homes added in-between the old homes has remained unchanged and unpaved since Dad was born there in 1950. And it won't be any time soon, changed or paved.

I don't remember the box. Not mine this time.

But that's not to say 100% that it's not mine I suppose. Not that certain. Nothing is 100%. If I could forget what had happened May 14th of that year and call the man that died that day (months after we buried him, my Dad, in a place called Pinewood), then it 207 couldn't be no trouble at all to forget a box I was 99.99% sure wasn't mine to

begin with— 99.99% certain it was there when I got here. But, like I said, my name is Lonnie Edwards The Drunk. And when I moved in on Woodlawn Ave. with Mitch my best friend in the world, thinking of him (Dad), I was already the steady drunk he was. Not certain of anything. But…

I just don't remember the box. Just his box without him in it, being lowered into the ground. Because he wasn't himself when he died— still not quite someone else, either. Who is that man in my father's grave…?

But like I was saying… 1950 was right in the middle of the 20th Century, and probably not a bad year to be born into then, knowing only what they could have known at the time— even if your family was poor and you had to grow up cutting wood with your brother and your dad… and his brothers and their sons. At least it's an honest life of hard labor with your family, they say. The biggest worries being falling limbs and yellow jackets— much different than *falling limbs* and *yellowed jackets*. Yellowed jackets being the hot spent rounds of a machine gun, and falling limbs… well, there's nothing ambiguous about falling limbs when conversation turns to 'famous bullets in wars of the 20th Century.'

But even by the time Dad was old enough to understand what war meant, rock and roll was becoming happily half-innocently popular, and the first US combat

units had only recently been deployed in small numbers to prevent the spread of Communism in that small jungle country on the other side of the huge world. And Dad was about to get his drivers license. So, 1950 wasn't exactly an awful year to be born in (if you wanted to get your license in 1966 and be able, the next year, to drive to rock concerts during the Summer of Love) if you wanted to put on a rock and roll album a decade and a half later in 1965, the year before you were to get your driver's license. Not bad, except for a few things you couldn't have known then, since they wouldn't have happened yet, or where still thought-motions-not-yet-actions-unfolding, nonevents un -acted upon, not yet…

-In 1966 (turning age 16) the US tripled the number of ground units deployed.

-In 1967 (turning age 17) that total number of ground troops was tripled again.

-In 1968 (turning age 18) The Tet Offensive begins and later that year Richard Milhouse Nixon becomes President of the United States

-In 1969 (turning 19) The United States Selective Service enacted the mandatory to meet the military's needs in the Republic of Vietnam.

So 1950 wasn't a bad year to be born into. Except it was the last year you could be born in and be qualified to enter the draft (1944 -1950).

In September of 1969 Dale Edwards entered United States Marine Corps. basic training on Parris Island, South Carolina. The Conflict in Vietnam had made such a demand on the United States military that it needed every warm body it could at once. The normal 13-week boot camp for the USMC was abbreviated to an emergency 9-week boot camp. This is the only instance in Marine Corps. history when this happened. Graduates of the boot camp were then sent without the standard 10 day leave after basic to an also-abbreviated MOS school to learn their combat trade. This too was tailored to meet the immediate needs of the US Military in Vietnam.

D.L. EDWARDS
2529722
U.S.M.C. A
METH.

1391 BULK FUEL SPECIALIST

*In-country for two tours of duty
December 1969—December 1970
March 1971 — April 1972

Dad said it wasn't that bad. Except then his face would say otherwise. He would tell me about how he was attached to the 3rd Amphibious Battalion because he was

very proficient at all sorts of vehicle maintenance. He could fix the river rat boats. He could fix the Humvees. He could fix the diesel generators. He could fix the jeeps. He could assist on basic HUEY helicopter maintenance. He could fix the high-speed fuel pumps. He was an expert marksman. Actual expert marksman. He could work on foreign-made equipment, which made him perfect for working with the precursor Marine Recon groups.

But he said it wasn't that bad. They listened to the B side of Electric Lady Land stoned with their buddies and a few South Vietnamese girls about their age, in the back room of the brothel a pretty one's mother ran. That's how they show it in the world of cinema anyway. Similar scenarios from him, his tellings of the war. Dad had snuck back some telling photographs. Him checking out girls on the beach. Him drinking beer with his buddies. Things like that. And, some other things not like that. I remember one specifically of him with a little girl on his lap after he had finished dancing with her at the orphanage and sat down, her still in arms tight, and she only has her left leg from the knee up, and she is pointing at his heart like to say 'this is where it will stay, this, his loving heart, here with him here with me.' He was trying to tell her a story about dancing magic creatures in the forests of the American South that come out at

night with their flutes and feathered heads, he said, but the approaching commotion was too loud to finish the tale, the South too far away, and their languages not quite the same. But both are smiling in the photograph, so they must have reached an understanding on the lessons of the story's end some other way. Bob Hope was keeping them entertained with the USO Show; on Christmas '69 (just months before he was readying to come home) he was chosen from the crowd to have the last dance with Miss Somewhere or Another '68 (America or Universe, the story changed every time he told it) before the cameras faded down on the evening's events. They saw it all the way back on Luther Lane. They knew it must not be that bad, since he could dance on television. And Dad was thinking then about how that little girl never would. And he wrote to tell them that, but it wasn't that bad for him— and he would be home soon. And he was. And he never saw that little girl again, except in his dreams. Not even in the photograph where they once had just finished sharing a dance were there any traces of him or her. And even then, realizing he was being erased from his own past when he would look back on the year he turned nineteen, the year he went to war.

Then he got sick from Agent Orange. So he never mentioned at lengths the War in Vietnam again, never thought another thing about it. He buried the war deep

enough away in the bottom of his mind (the so-called voices locked in the caged soul, forgotten), and packed so much junk on top of that war that he just flat out forgot that he had ever been to a war. He'd say I don't remember…

But I don't remember it. The box… Was it his?

When Dad started showing the signs of diabetes (a disease which they know beyond a shadow of a doubt is linked to prolonged exposure to epic-levels of Agent Orange), he knew he was too tough to let something like simple sugar kill him. He'd made it through Vietnam for chrissakes. And he wasn't about to quit the whiskey or the cocaine, he'd say to the doctors. Not after all they'd been through together. Diabetes didn't run in the family, and even if it did, who's to say that it's anyone's business but his own. That's how he thought, anyway. Like genetics and heredity were some kinds of conspiracies against the pleasures of life. Because he was too tough to be killed by the tools of that war— and too sound of mind to stop enjoying the pleasures of this life. He'd already proved that once before in 1969. He was too tough for some rainbow defoliant to come back and haunt him over three decades after he'd last used it on the dense tropical foliage. He was too tough. So when they let him go home that third week in May, and after all the second-round surgeries, the get-well visitors,

the prayers, and the withdrawals, he did the toughest thing he could think to do. Left a note for my momma on the door *Sue don't come in. Tell Lonnie I'm sorry and I Love You.*

I don't remember that box at all. How could I?

I moved today. I packed every single thing I owned, with the help of an old friend, into a moving van, and we moved away. So I'll leave it (the box) here and let the next tenants deal with it, like the previous had done to me. I'm moving today. I'm leaving it. I never owned a box labeled on top in black… **[Thought interrupted by a voice]** ***goes on*** like they just got distracted and didn't finish writing what they were writing. Goes on what, or how? A wall? In a circle?

"Lonnie! Let's Go."

"Hold on Mitch. I'm just making sure that I haven't left anything behind. I have to double check that no one knows I ever lived here. Nothing behind with my name on it. That way if I've messed anything up they won't know it's me… until I'm long gone. Not that I have or haven't. Just freaks me out knowing they'll know who was here in these spaces before they arrived."

"Hurry. The trucks running. We can't keep them waiting. They won't know what to do without us. That's irrational."

I knew I didn't remember that box. Can't remember what you've never thought of, or have known. I'm Lonnie Edwards. I thought of my dad while moving today. That's all.

"Lonnie."

"What Mitch?"

"You sure this isn't yours?"

"You just want me to say NO don't you? N.O. Not mine"

"What about the desk? I know for a fact this is yours. You're taking it aren't you? You know, Lonnie, if I ever have a son I'm gonna name him after you."

"Way to change the subject there skipper. That's sweet Mitch; real sweet. Whatever. If I ever have a son, which I won't, I ain't bringin' any kids into this world, I'm going to name him after Richard Nixon."

"What? Why?"

"Dad thought he was great. Him and Oliver North. Dad said Nixon was the only honest man in America during Vietnam. Said he did everything mankind could possibly do to end the war. Dad thought sure that the human race would be so inspired by the Moon Landing that there'd be no possible way anyone could keep on fighting."

"Big D was a character, Lon. Walking beautiful contradiction. Remember when we'd ask him about aliens and God and outer space and he'd just say, 'Chariots of The

Gods?' boys. Chariots of the Gods?'?"

"Yeah, that was his explanation for everything. It was basically his religion. He'd have soon the Preacher read from it than the Bible at his funeral. Von Daniken was one of the Big 3 for Big D. Richard Nixon, Eric Von Daniken, and Oliver North. God I can't even… is this real life right now?"

"I'm afraid so little brother. Come here." [Mitch hugs Lonnie and they both start ugly crying in the hallway.]

"Fuck Agent Orange. Fuck Vietnam. I'm going to California with a big ole aching in my heart."

"So grab the box?"

"Yeah… Of course, Mitchell. Of course it's mine. But let me live in denial until the grief and resentment wear off. At least until my first mid-life crisis."

A Gracious Awakening

"YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE to wake up son. School's about to start."

"Dad…?"

"No sir. If you were my son I'd have woken you up with my foot, swiftly. Fortunately for you I'd never treat a stranger like that, because I have no vested interest in your future like I do my son's… well, not exactly. I just don't treat any person that way unless I love them like family. Especially one drunk as a skunk and passed out on the front stairs of an elementary school. You poor young fool. You aren't much older than my son and already you're acting like an addict that's been on the streets for forty years."

"I… I… thank you, I guess. I'm not sure… exactly…"

"How you got here."

"Right, yeah. I must have… last night… after I…"

"Left the bar."

"Yeah. Probably thought I ought to walk, or couldn't find my… my…"

"Car."

"Yes sir, car. It must still be on the…"

"Playground. Under the monkey bars."

"Right. At the playground, under the monk… wha? Huh? No, no. I was at a bar. Is that a bar?"

"No, son. I'm saying your car is around the side of the school building there. On the playground, under the monkey bars. You might ought to get that thing moved before the first teachers start arriving. Definitely before the parents begin dropping the students off."

"Oh. Oh, yes sir. And thank you for waking me up. Were you just passing by and happen to see my car there?"

"No, I saw you first. Then I saw your car. And I wasn't just passing by either."

"No?"

"No."

"Ohhhh noooo. Are you a plain clothes? Because if I get arrested one more time I'll have to do eleven twenty-nine in the county."

"Is that so? What were your priors for?"

"Two. Public urination."

"Both times?"

"Yes sir. I grew up out in the country back in the Mid-

west. You can piss anywhere you want back home."

"Is that so?"

"Yes sir. So if you could just let me go, I'll move my car right away and you'll never see me again. I promise sir. Please don't take me in."

"Oh no. No, no, no."

"Aww… please sir… what can I do? Why no? Why not yes? I'm sorta down on, well I wouldn't say luck I don't guess. It's my own…"

"I mean no, I'm not a cop in plain clothes."

"Oh. Oh thank the lord. I thought for sure you were, since who else would wake up a stranger passed out in public in a big city like this? I mean, there are people passed out all over L.A. right now and no one is waking them up except cops. I thought you had to be a cop."

"No, son. I was just about to unlock the front doors here and get ready for the school day."

"Oh lord, you work at this school? I'm so sorry sir. I'm just going to get my car now and you'll never see me again, I swear. I've just made some really poor life choices lately and that's all. It's because I just moved here. Haven't been here a year yet. But this hasn't happened before, not like this. I… I… I normally don't even drink that much or anything, really. Well… I mean… on occasions I do, but it's not a problem. I know that seems hard to believe considering the circumstances, but it's just that… I

mean I could quit no problem, it's just that since… well since… well it's just…"

"Just what?"

"Nothing sir. I mean nothing to worry a school teacher with while he's trying to open up and get ready for class. I just appreciate you not calling the cops on me."

"School principal. I'm the principal here at Alta Rosa Academy. We're a K-8 magnet school for gifted children. And I never said that I wasn't going to report this incident to the authorities."

"But I thought… what about you telling me to move my car? I thought that meant that you were, you know, letting me off the hook."

"I tell you what. I'll make you a deal."

"Alright, sir. What's the deal? What do I have to do?"

"You meet me at the brick two-story building on the corner of Coronado Ave. and 58th Street tonight at 7:00 and I won't report this to the authorities."

"I appreciate that sir but… you don't know my name and I… I have my keys here. What's to stop me from just…?"

"Taking off? Nothing. But you're still standing here aren't you? What is stopping you? Go ahead. Take off. Hit it. You'll have a good five minute jump on the boys in blue. It'll take me that long to get into the school, turn off the alarm, unlock my office and make the call. You might

even have longer than that, depending on how busy they are and how serious they think the call is. But before you take off, just know that I've already written your plate number down. I've got the VIN down too. Oh, and make and model and color. And while you were still blacked out cold I took your wallet out to see what your name was and if you were an organ donor or not. That way if you were dead I could let them know who you were and to hurry, since you are in fact a donor, so that they might be able to salvage some of your internals. At least some good could have come out of your foolish death. And that's what it would have been too, another foolish death in the city of angels."

"…" Lonnie just stared at the grey-headed stranger. The sun was beating into his face, pulling the booze-sweat out of his forehead like a natural spring. To the unforgiving person he would have wreaked like a heap of empty bottles and bad decisions, a smell that could only conjure in them contempt and disgust, not moral disgust so much as physical. Lonnie smelled like cheap gin and old vomit. To the principal of Alta Rosa, a forgiving person, he smelled sad and lonely, a smell he was familiar with. Gin and old vomit is a lonesome odor.

"Well… what's it going to be Mr. Edwards?"

"I don't reckon I have much of a choice now. Do I?"

"Sure you do. Free will has been granted to us all. But I

might say this though, there's some folks down there in the county jailhouse that would argue otherwise. I don't think I'd choose to join them if I were you. If I were you— and I was, believe it or not, years and years ago— I'd make a deal with me and meet me tonight down at the LAFA House. So how about it?"

"Yes sir. We got a deal. Yes sir Mister… I don't guess I caught your name." "My close friends call me Moses."

"Because of your wisdom and leadership? You being a principal of a school for gifted children and all…?"

"No," he laughed, "because of my age."

LDE, I Joins a 12-Step Program: Character Development

WHEN THE BOX MAKES it around the circle to you, you put in only what you can. No more and no less. It's not exactly like church offering, but one wouldn't be far off to make that comparison when explaining the process to someone who's never been to a meeting before. Little George, the six-foot-nine-inch-three-hundred-and-fifty-pound man that sat next to me the first time I attended a LAFA House (Los Angeles Friends of Alcoholics) meeting, explained it to me that way.

"It pays for coffee supplies first and foremost. Also it pays the bills and whatever else we need to keep the place running. Yous guys, yous newbies, yous'll see what it means to the place. It's lifeblood really. It's like giving at church to keep the church up. Tithing I think they call it. I don't attend service, so don't hold me to that. I used to consider myself an Agnostic, now I'm not so sure. So don't hold me to it." Little George said.

"I… I won't." I said.

"This is my church. My cathedral of sobriety. No offense if you're a man of faith. But I just can't see it like I can sobriety. Before I come to the LAFA House I was one of the lost sheep. Know what I mean? Do you?"

"Yeah. But what if you ain't got even a penny to your name? What do you do?"

"What do mean what do you do? How come yous ain't got no coin? Huh? Why is that? Drink it away? Huh? Did you? Drank all your coin away didn't you. I swear…"

"Take it easy Georgey," a man in a nice suit across the circle said. Little George was a little pushy at first. He was one of the elders of the bunch, so I guess he felt like he had an obligation to overemphasize his struggle to make his sobriety point. Salvation as he called it without the slightest hint of irony in his voice since he wasn't a believer but always used religious language when speaking of the spiritual qualities of the journey toward becoming and remaining sober. Other than Georgey, there were only four other members who had been sober longer. In ascending order of number of years sober:

4.) Mary Stewart, who everyone called Mother Mary because at one time she had taught at a private Catholic school down in La Jolla, which explained why it was so difficult for her to stay out of the bottle.

3.) Wayne Oliver, or Ollie North within the group, nicknamed that because he somehow managed to men-

tion some government conspiracy theory every time he got up to speak. He often favored the so-called deep state position. He wore an *Ollie North for President* tee shirt half the time.

2.) Elvis Miyamoto, who had no nickname for the obvious reason that no one could come up with anything better than what his parents had already named him. His father was from Osaka, his mother Memphis. Oddly enough, they met as missionaries in South America. What's more, they danced their first dance to "You Were Always on My Mind" at a social for the missionaries. Elvis's version of course. You get to know the particulars of people's lives if you go to these groups long enough. And first among the elders…

1.) Mr. Jerry Wilkerson, on the wagon thirty-one years. But to everyone in the room he was simply known as Moses. Unlike Little George, Moses was a man of faith. And like his nickname might suggest to someone familiar with the Old Testament, he has helped deliver many people out from the bonds of the bottle, myself included…

*

[I'd been in L.A. for almost eight months before I found the LAFA House, or should I say it found me. During those eight months I'd fractured my ankle, busted out my two front teeth, destroyed over $4,000 worth of city property with my newly leased car (i.e. park benches, light

poles, street signs, guard rails, etc.), got picked up for public urination twice, and got evicted — (due to a very small fire not much larger than a match end burning— and some other small incidents not worth mentioning here) — from the building that Mitch and his family and me had moved into when we arrived from the Midwest after college. We rented adjoining flats, which shared a kitchen and living area. They were allowed to stay, but only after I pleaded with the landlord and assured him that I was completely to blame for the small fire in the elevator. And I agreed to paint over the lewd comments I apparently spray-painted on his apartment door, and his office door… and the door to the maintenance closet. And of course the door to the parking garage. I don't recall my participation in these artistic endeavors, but security cameras don't lie, so I had no other choice but to remedy the situation with Superintendent Wong and apologize to my best friend for the problems that I had caused (Sorry Mitch).

"Lonnie. I just don't know what to do, man. You're my best friend. But I got a family I got to think about. You need help, man. And you need a job. You got too much talent to waste it like this. I know you miss Dale. I do too, believe it or not. You forget we've known each other almost since birth. He was like a second dad to me. I know you hate him for what he did. But you can't do

this to yourself much longer. He'd kill you if he were here now. You didn't act like this while he was living. You'll kill yourself in half the time he did if you keep on… and there won't even be an excuse like the war for you. Don't take that the wrong way, I'm not justifying his actions, suicide is suicide no matter what, but I mean… he had heavier demons than any one of us could ever imagine. You know that better than anyone. And you've seen what can happen to folks who don't deal with those demons outright: feel sorry for themselves so much they lose sight of the real world, whatever that is. You have to find a way to be happy, man. A balance. You understand me? Lonnie? Lonnie…"

By then, I suspect, I'd already blacked out on Mitch's couch. It was the last night before I had to be out. The next morning I would be homeless, living out of my car, which was about to be repossessed if I didn't come up with two months worth of back payments...

...I came to in the dark of that flat I'd called home for the last eight months around eleven that night. Eleven is early on a drinking night in L.A. I'd already been drinking since eight that morning anyway. No reason to stop. I had exactly enough dough to get too drunk to walk. Not a penny more. So I grabbed the last of my stuff that I hadn't packed into my car yet and headed toward my favorite bar.]

Introducing
Reed C. Bohanan

"DON'T WORRY ABOUT PUTTING anything in the box, Lonnie, if you don't have it to give. Just remember to give when you can, when you get back on your feet. That's all we ask. That box keeps this place going. And this place keeps many of us going, so we don't mind to give what we can to the box," Moses said.

"Tonight I'm going to begin this meeting by telling everyone about my experiences as an addict. Most of you have already heard it, but this is mostly for Lonnie and the first-termers. The way these things work, Lonnie, is that we go in a circle and share whatever we'd like to share with the group. We can share whatever we feel is relevant to us. Talk about family, or friends, or loves, or loses, or things that make us happy or sad. Things recovery related. Solutions. Whatever. As long as it isn't negative in regards to anyone's process of recovery, we can share it. We are here to help, not hinder. Encourage, not condemn. Love, not loathe. Lonnie I'd like you to move

over here beside me, to my right. We are going to move to my left around the circle. I'd like you to hear everyone else speak before you do. If you decide that come your turn you're not comfortable enough yet to open up, that is perfectly fine. Many people come and just listen for weeks before they feel like they can open up and share their own experiences with the group. That's okay. The goal is to keep coming no matter how long it takes. Eventually, you'll no longer be able to contain it and you'll have to share. You'll find you need to connect with the group, link your experience to everyone else's experience. But before you can do that, you'll have to admit to yourself, your mind body and soul, that you have a problem that needs fixing, a demon that needs shaking. Until you do that sincerely, it doesn't matter how many meetings you come to or how long you talk, you'll never be able to put that snake down. And that snake, well, he won't ever take his fangs out of you as long as you're squeezing him."

I got up. Half the group shifted to make room for me beside Moses. Little George was almost directly across from me now, grinning from ear to ear. Now there is a man, I thought, that would love nothing more than to pick up a handful of the fattest rattlesnakes on the planet and feel again that hot poison coursing through his veins. He'd probably do it too, if he didn't love telling his sobriety story more— the story of how those snakes were his

when they were babies, before he turned them loose. Everyone's story was similar. Everyone, apparently, has to hit rock bottom before they can begin to regain control of life. You can't almost hit bottom. You can't come close to having a problem. You can't see yourself as maybe on the path to destruction and take the nearest exit with the hope that it is the exit to your salvation. No. It doesn't work like that. At least not for the people I met at the LAFA House. The road has to end at a wall. Reaching rock bottom is an absolute necessity for salvation. You have to hit that wall doing a hundred. If salvation is what you strive for, you better pray to whoever or whatever you pray to that you reach rock bottom, sooner better than later.

Moses finished speaking and sat down. The lady to his left stood and followed suit. It went on like this until it was time for a smoke break. When the group reconvened, Little George took his turn and passed it on. By this time, I had stopped listening to everyone's spill and began thinking about my own. I wasn't sure if I was ready to share on my first night. I wasn't sure if I even needed the LAFA House to solve my problems. I'd only come, anyway, to avoid another arrest and 11-29 in the county. I wasn't sure I was even an alcoholic. Maybe just an unhappy drunk. I wasn't sure of anything at the time, except I knew that the man to my right had just stood up

and was about to speak. So at this point I was thinking that I had better make my mind up soon, whether to talk or not, I was about to be up.

The man to my right was dressed in a tailor-made, pin-striped suit. He wore patent leather Italian loafers with no socks. His watch didn't tick. It rolled. His rings didn't sparkle. They glowed. His hair wasn't so much combed straight back as it was molded. Did he come straight from work or the runway? The office or a used car lot? A movie set or a courtroom? I couldn't tell. For reasons beyond me at that moment, unlike most of the others there, this man had caught my attention. But only briefly.

Moses leaned over and whispered to me, "Lonnie, listen very carefully to this man's story. He's been with us for many years, and he is one of our great success stories. He came from nothing. Poverty. A broken home. Many personal tragedies. Addictions to every known intoxicant. Beat them all. Now he runs his own multi-million dollar company. He's been on the wagon for over fifteen years now. If it weren't for him, the LAFA House would have went under a few years back during the big recession. Fine man. Listen…"

"Good evening you all. Most of you know me, but for those of you who do not, my name is Reed Caldwell Bohanan and I am an addict of epic proportions. But thanks to this place I have been clean now for going on sixteen

years."

"Hi Reed!" the group sang.

"I first picked up the bottle back in college…," Reed faded away.

Lonnie Introduces Himself

I, Lonnie, drifted off into my own thoughts and missed everything Reed had to say. I drifted off thinking: What the hell am I going to say? Something like: At twenty, having already been a bit of a wild child already, it's easy to get drunk enough and stoned enough to forget your dad just recently shot himself in his easy chair. I know it sounds hard to believe that anything could conjure up such rabid amnesia in a person's mind. But if you'll drink together a big bottle of SoCo and a small bottle of Dr. Pepper (a drink called Southern Syrup, so I've heard) and refill your glass every 2 hours for six months, you'll see what I mean. If by then you haven't already forgotten that I mentioned this little mind-fuck-challenge to you and given you the recipe for near-instant amnesia, then you and I share a similar tolerance— one which ought to be measured in the mega tonnage. So, if you'll add a powerful hallucinogen like, say, LSD and an amphetamine-based candy-flippin roll like MDMA (Molly some call it) to the previously

mentioned recipe and repeat as necessary for consistency, you can cut that six months to amnesia down to about three. And if that don't do it for you— make you forget your father's suicide— go ahead and partake in this recipe (and those like it) just for fun (not to forget) for a few years before he does it (pulls the trigger). Then about seven months before you know your father is bound to die and there's not a thing in the world you can do about it but watch his skeleton force its way to the surface of the skin, start tripling your intake of that potent elixir I just mentioned and go ahead and try to forget about what hasn't happened yet. Forget about the future. Future is a synonym for death. Keep on partying like he did (for the better part of four decades was his run). That'll fix you. You'll see. Amnesia will come as quick as sunrise…

...Follow my lead to willful amnesia and six months after he's gone you'll be bent over a bar in awkward intoxicated positions. Your left pointer finger will be reducing the noise in your left ear so you can hear the ringing in your right. You'll be trying to call him to tell him the strangely familiar joke you just heard from the blonde next to you at the bar, if you and your father have that kind of father-son relationship like me and mine did and you can call him at that hour without worrying about the consequences of such a night-owl-collegiate lifestyle. And then, when he doesn't pick up, you'll realize. And you'll feel

mind-degraded and mind-dumbed. You'll think what the hell am I doing? It's going on 3am; he's most likely asleep. And only THEN, maybe, will it hit you. Damn, I HAVE heard that joke before; HE's the one who told it to me. Duh. So you'll hang up real quick, because you know at any moment he could wake and answer. Or maybe not. Maybe you hesitate just a tad longer, the rings lulling you into the urge to hear more ringing, and maybe his voice. Because you know he's there, comfortable in his bed, phone on the bedside table. You can see the whole picture, the lucid overhead view of your sleeping father, face up with his arms across his chest, his phone about to wake him from his peaceful slumber. You know he'll wake at any moment. And then where would you be? You'd be on the phone with your grumpy old dad who you'd've just woke at 3am to tell him a joke he's already heard. That's where you'd be. And since at that time you'd already be talking to him, since you didn't hang up like you should have, you still won't realize that he has already heard the joke you were going to tell, that he told you first, so you'll tell it anyway because you're drunk and raging on aggressive chemical compounds. Tell it, Don Quixote! Tilt at the Windmills of Good Taste and Decorum. Then before you deliver the punch line, perhaps, you'll finally realize what you have tried so hard to forget: that you'll never be able to make him laugh again. Not at his own joke. Not at

that hour. Not in this life. And most likely if he could answer, which he can't, he'd say, "son, you driving drunk tonight?" And you'd hate to lie to him and say, "No Dad," like you would have to at that hour to ease his worried mind. So let's pretend you DO hang up real quick, indulge me here. Pretend it didn't happen. Get back to whatever it is you were stuttering about with that redhead next to you and order three more before Last Call for you and her and her dark-haired friend next to you and her. Tip the barkeep. Thank the blonde for the joke and tell her that you'll have to tell your dad at a decent hour. Say something like, "I'd call now but I'm sure he's sleeping," because you're sure he'll love it. Keep the delusion intact, and still the next morning it won't hit you either. Still it won't hit you, even after you look through your phone for some hint or clue about who you were with the night before and what you are now doing in a stranger's arms at high noon. Did you pay your tab? What color is her hair really? Who are those people in that forgotten town where you were last night, and this morning? And that man that you thought of dialing, why is he, his number, on your phone? Is this some kind of lame undergraduate joke, some mind eraser, some ruffie, some mistaken identity... something more potent in one of your thirteen or so drinks? Ask yourself these things without second thought. You'll think you still had a good time, regardless.

And whoever he is, that man you dialed, it was probably just a button hit in-pocket on accident. Because you'd never tell him that joke at that hour, right? And whoever she is, you'll forget her name at first, call her the girl with the hair that's exactly the color you like best, no doubt she will love you for the rest of your heartbroken life. Won't she? No doubt. No. Doubt. It won't set in. Not even then…

...That's how powerful the mind can be when it's assisted by a powerful regiment of aggressive intoxicating chemicals and booze. Amnesia comes as easy as breathing. Not even then, that morning after, will it hit you. IT. The big skeleton in the box in your closet easily overlooked under all your suits of denial. And still you'll think you had a good time, still. Until you remember that phone call from your mother later that day**:** "Lonnie, sit down honey. You're gonna need to come home. Your daddy died today."

Only then will it all come back to you. That man you tried to call was your dead father. That joke was his. That stranger was just another ingredient in the elixir you concocted to erase the memory of the life and person you hate most of all: yourself. And just like that the past will rush upon you like a tidal wave, a sudden accumulation of suffocating moments that have been stuffed away like old photographs in an attic bin. You'll take a

gasp of pure air and shed a tear if you can, but by that time—the moment of realization—it'll be after five in the evening and you'll already be late for happy hour. No time for emotions. Thank God for man-made amnesia, you'll say, as you dim the lights, down a pre-game shot, and fold back your sheets, hit a line for old time sake, hoping maybe you'll run into what's-her-name again tonight. This time the joke's on you. It always will be.

Reed faded back in.

"… and that's when Moses found me down on Rodeo Dr," Reed continued. "It was 8:00 in the morning. I was stark naked and begging people for change. I needed another bottle. It was mid-August and I was shaking like I was about to freeze to death. Had the cold sweats and the shakes. Moses here took me to Nickel-N-Dime thrift— butt naked on his hot moist leather backseat— and bought me some clothes. After the meeting that night he took me back to his place and fed me and gave me a bed to sleep in. Six months later I was completely clean. That was nearly sixteen years ago. I can't thank him enough."

Reed finished and sat down.

"Thank you Reed," Moses said.

"Now then, Lonnie would you like to share anything with the group?" Breathe. Just like you rehearsed in

your mind, except… maybe a little more coherent. Tell them exactly what you just told yourself. Go slow. Take your time. But I already decided I couldn't say that. Wait a minute. You can't ignore me, Lonnie. Yes you, I mean I, can. No… yes. Do it then. I am:

"Hi… Hi everyone, my name is Lon… Lon… Lonnie Edwar… Edwards. With an S"

Good start. Didn't stutter a bit. Shut up. I can do this.

"Hi Lonnie!" Everyone sang.

You Know About The Aran Islands?

"LONNIE, LONNIE."

Reed pulled up beside me as I was walking down 57th headed toward nowhere in particular. My car was on empty in the LAFA House parking lot. I'd used the last little bit of gas in the tank to get to the meeting that night. And while I had definite plans to sleep in the backseat, it was a nice night and I figured it would be best if I walked off some energy before I curled up back there.

"Hey, hello… Mr. Bohanan … good meeting tonight huh? I mean… I guess it was good, since it's my first I don't really know if it was good or bad or what. Was it good?"

"Any meeting you make it to is good, Lonnie. Some may be more engaging than others. But if you show up it's a good one. So it was a good one, yeah, it was a good one. Where you headed tonight?"

"Um… well… I was just going to go to my… my… for a… a walk. I'm just going for a little walk. Then I'm head-

ed to get some rest back at my… well, actually I was thinking of camping out tonight Mr. Bohanan . It's such a nice night I figured what the heck. I ain't been camping in years. And since I'm turning over a new leaf and all… a little nighttime fresh air would definitely do me some good, know what I mean?"

"Oh yeah, I know. Where do you live, Lonnie? Are you camping near your home? You got a backyard or someplace near to pitch a tent?"

"Oh no Mr. Bohanan . I ain't going to use a tent. Just sleep right out under the stars… well the ambient glow I guess. I suppose there's not very many stars in the L.A. night sky."

"Lonnie I don't think…," Reed stopped in mid-sentence and thought about the situation for what seem to Lonnie to be at least half an hour; really it was barely over a minute before he finished what he was saying. He knew Lonnie wasn't being truthful with him, but he didn't press the issue.

"Here's my card Lon; if you need anything, anything at all, you don't hesitate to give me a call. If I can't help you I'll find someone who can. Everybody needs a little help every now and then. Remember that."

"I appreciate that, Mr. Bohanan . I really do."

"Call me Reed."

"Okay. Reed."

"Well, if everything's alright I guess I ought to get on home. I got a big work day ahead of me tomorrow. See you at the LAFA House tomorrow night?" "Oh yeah. I'll be there with bells on." Lonnie said.

"Have a good night camping Lon. It was nice to meet you. Remember what I said now. It'll do you some good when you need it to."

"I will."

Reed put his Bentley into gear and slowly continued on down 57th toward the RedCap Towers. I began to think about how he would manage, at six foot two inches, to sleep comfortably in his back seat without the aid of hard liquor. It wasn't five seconds later that he was sprinting down 57th toward the red light where Reed was momentarily stopped. He tapped on the driver side window.

"Reed, Mr. Bohanan , sir… do you own a couch?"

"Decide against camping?"

"Um… well I don't own anything to sleep on…"

"Well you're in luck Lonnie. I own a whole building. Get in."

"Thank you, Mr. Bohanan ."

"Reed."

"Right… sorry. Reed. I haven't been out of college long. I'm still used to calling everyone Dr. or Mr. or Ms. I forget I'm an adult sometimes."

"College huh? What did you study?"

"New Media Advertising and…"

"Get in first," Reed said.

"… and Public Relations. I always wanted to be a newspaper man. But print media is a dying art. It won't be too long before everything, I mean everything, will be strictly on the web. A web-only world is where we'll be in ten years Reed. Not that I'm against that; I just like the touch and the smell of a hardcopy newspaper fresh off the press. I hope to be working in the field ASAP. Soon as I can get clean and get my act together I'm going to find me a good job. Surely I can find something in this city. I hope I don't have to turn to porn," Lonnie laughed a bit. "But if worse comes to worst, I'll have to put it all out there, if you know what I mean. Anyway… what do you do Mr. Bohanan ?"

"Reed."

"Right. Sorry. Reed."

"A little of this, a little of that. I'm into real estate most recently… as a hobby. I own a few high-end restaurants here and in Chicago. I own a small share of an import/export business with my brother and sister. But my main focus is on my Internet advertising conglomerate AMTROPETA. That's why I smiled a bit when you told me what you went to school for. I work in the field you studied. Not to toot my own horn but I'm a bit of a pio-

neer in the industry, the web industry that is."

Reed and Lonnie pulled up to the gates of RedCap Tower #2. Reed entered a few digits on the electronic key pad and the gates opened. He smiled and waved at a small stature elderly security guard named Rex who sits just inside the parking garage. Reed made some small talk with Rex before finding his usual spot. Lonnie just took it all in, thankful he wasn't going to be sleeping in the back of his car. The elevator doors closed and Reed handed Lonnie a small cylindrical key.

"You see that slot there at the top of the key pad? The one that says Floor 17 Suite / Roof Top / Helio Pad. Slide that key in and give it a turn. When the light turns green press the button beside the slot." Reed said. Lonnie followed his directions, and within seconds they were walking into a multi-million dollar bachelor pad that looked like it was designed by Dolce & Gabbana and Louis XIV.

"Lon, you can have the guest bedroom. Third door down the hall on the right. Make yourself at home. You're welcome to anything in the refrigerator and the pantry. Or if you'd like you can call in room service from the café on the 5th floor and have it put on my tab. So long as it is not booze, we're good to go. This remote controls everything. The TV, the stereo, the lights, the curtains, etc. etc. I hate to rush off but I got a big day at

work tomorrow and R.C. Bohanan needs his beauty rest to be at the top of his game."

"Reed I really appreciate everything you're doing for me, but really, you didn't have to do all this. I would have been grateful just to have a couch to sleep on. I'm basically living out of my car as of this morning. So I have to get something going quick or else I'm going to have to find me a homeless shelter or something. Maybe 11-29 wouldn't have been so bad. Three hots and a cot, and not a drop of alcohol in sight. No, but seriously, Reed, I can't thank you enough."

"It's called paying it forward Lon. Moses did the same for me. Now I'm doing what I can. So make yourself at home and I'll see you tomorrow."

I made my way around the posh penthouse suite of R.C. Bohanan , examining the near-priceless art on the walls and the designer European furniture, mostly Danish Modern. There were pictures everywhere of Reed and a host of A-list celebrities and some of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. I play my cards right that might be me with those ladies someday. By the time I turned to ask Reed who this one particular blonde was with him and the old fat guy from The Don Sidwell show, he had disappeared down the hallway. I'll ask him in the morning. I can't believe this, really. Last night I was passed out cold on the front steps of an elementary

school, homeless and flat broke. Now I'm in a multi-million dollar loft overlooking the city of angels. Theoretically I'm still homeless and broke, but I don't think a man like Reed is going to just let me starve on the streets of L.A. Not after helping me out like he is. I mean, I can't over stay my welcome or anything. I do have to get a job and a place of my own. And I do have to get sober. But one day at a time. I got to take it one day at a time. Tomorrow I'll go to the library and build myself a resume. I'll need to call Mitch and let him know everything is okay, not to worry about me. He'll be proud that I'm going to meetings. But that's tomorrow. Tonight I'm going to enjoy the view on the balcony and have some prime rib ordered up. Then I'm going to get some rest. This is it. The first day of the new, sober Lonnie Edwards. No more drink for this guy… speaking of drink, I believe I'll fix myself a snack before I put in my order at the café.

As I made my way to the kitchen to find something to eat and drink, Reed's voice came over the intercom:

"Lon, my man, what do you know about the Aran Islands?"

Huh?

AMTROPETA HQ

Marketing Dept.

I'M STARTING TO DEVELOP a work problem. Could be boredom; could be frustration. Could be a lack of excitement. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate the job; but that's just it: it's a job. I'm just… just not feeling the writing anymore like I used to. This is how days go by these days:

11:00am Covers are thrown aside; alarm gets shut off.

11:17am Having already had coffee on a timer, I head to the office sipping Kona.

11:23am I arrive @ work office, 3rd floor, my building. I reside on the 11th.

11:30am Boss at AMTROPETA (Don't worry, the current CEO can't pronounce it either, just calls it work) assigns some new, HOTT locale everyone is raving about and I begin briefly researching: scouring the World Wide Web for alluring pics of local scenery, authentic places to dine and sleep, information and facts about whatever local customs might entice someone to pay top-dollar to wit-

ness these allures from the front row, so to speak. Events the locals already offer for free because that's just how they live and they don't charge each other to participate in community events. But they (our customers) don't know that, so we do charge— not so much for the events themselves, but for the service of informing our customers of such events. Then we give them VIP status and get them to the best vantage point possible, the front row so to speak. We turn major profit, and we're good at it.

11:35am I start reading about the specifics for awhile. Then I chop out a few lines of good sounding advertising mumbo jumbo.

12:00 sharp I go to lunch at the 5th floor café.

12:33pm I come back and zone out for awhile. Then, and only then, sometime near quitting time do I make a decent eBrochure.

4:30pm Clock out.

It isn't that I can't produce decent copy or make a sell at any time of day. I can. I used to sell vacuums door-to-door in college. I'm at the top of my game when I choose to be. I just have a hard time getting excited about writing about places I've never seen. I mean, when any search reveals a wealth of hi-def pics of any place Reed feels is worth my gushing ad copy about. A plethora if you'll Google search synonyms for wealth, as in, "he

has a wealth of knowledge and experience." I say this because Reed loves the word plethora and likes me to use it in ad copy as many times as possible without sounding redundant or pretentious. I study the images. Then I can convincingly say *the emerald mountains this… the azure sky that…* or something poetic about whatever the search reveals. Whatever the place in the brochure or pop-up ad requires. I can say it beautifully. I can amplify the image into worlds with words, one in happy web-conjunction with the other. I can do this at any hour of the day. I'm a word man. It's just hard to get excited about it these days. War looming on as it is. The web is filled with stark shock n awe. Nobody is vacationing hardly these days. The word has been commoditized for far too long and there isn't a-thing I can do about it here. So I usually put off doing anything until the last half hour or so. The task is becoming increasingly difficult to swallow because they aren't my worlds, these places I write about. I can't quite accurately render with words the relationship between time and place in the pics on the web. It's like looking at a postcard of the Eiffel Tower and then telling your mother the tower's only four inches tall and yet still manages to be breathtaking in its magnitude.

But these words I write, they're not my words really. My name's not on the final product. So I don't stress the

time/place problem too much. I just work here. But that's not to say I can't produce on cue at any hour of the day. I mean let's just say Reed (my boss's boss) comes in and says, "Lonnie, Mount Rushmore." (Not that he would, it's been overdone a thousand times.) No doubt I could sit in my cubicle/office, enter ***mt rush*** into an image search and give the consumer (and thus my boss, Jerry, and his boss, Reed) the awe-inspiring-deeply-romantic patriotic copy they were looking for when they (the consumers) entered ***mount rushmo*** into the travel guide search that brought them to our page, then to my piece. Exactly the words they were wanting to hear, whether they knew it or not when they were tossing around vacation ideas during the height of the War in Iraq and Afghanistan. [Maybe we all need a vacation from ourselves and our screens.]

Every American deep down wants to be moved to purchase in wartime, moved by a guiding voice to spring for the upgrade. It's one of the few great American bastions of consumer freedom, a revolt against the tyranny of the mundane: the right to buy something we can't afford. I can move them to spend the extra $700 one-way-for-two that it would cost them to peer through hi-def telescopic lenses at Abe's stone nostrils and a granite Bull Moose'stache cut into the side of a Dakota Mountain Range. I know I could just by looking at a page

or two of hi-res pics and saying a few words about the well-taken images on the screen, so long as the screen is clear and the image in focus. Snap, boom, click, click, done. Quick as that I can rattle off words I've heard others say about similar scenes and similar situations, ready-made stock phrases for the sell. I write the slogans of national pride at a time when morale is dwindling about places of post-postmodern patriotic romance: the laser shows at Stone Mountain or the fireworks at Rushmore. The solemn vigils at ground zero. That's not my problem, getting the job done. My problem (though I don't stress it much here in the office; I do want to keep the job) is accurately rendering the time and the space, or place we can call it, in the copy I write. I want to feel authentic when I write. Company protocol doesn't allow for it. It (corporate ad copy) is instant and tiny; it doesn't have a very long shelf life. And it doesn't get remembered easily. Ads need to be remembered, engrained into the collective conscience of the market. Out pace the war media in the working short term memory bank. Our copy capitalizes on the impulse buy. We unapologetically play on the cliched patriotism the news feeds us. Our designs are designed only to draw people in for that moment with their gloss. The theory is that it should be that good. So good they just have to see it for themselves right then; the moment they first see the ad is the point

of sale. My recent copy just isn't good enough to fulfill the lingering urge to plan a vacation and take the time to see everything in depth and filled with life. If our ads don't move the customer to buy immediately we're dead in the water. That customer will never return. Our copy just sells the quick, upgraded tour, the surface of a location, the front door of the Louvre but nothing inside. No Mona Lisa for you! It's all about the impulse buy, and our design reflects it. Just the surfaces. In our ads it's too hard to judge distance and time of day. Hell, I can't tell if the cabaña is located on the beach or a man-made sandy cove a quarter mile from the sea, beside a huge infinity pool where the children of the wealthier guests take snorkeling lessons and pee when the urge hits them. Will there be a view of the sun going down? Who knows? Look close enough and the fritters there on the counter in the image of the continental breakfast look dusty; no taste buds riled up by dust. Is the breakfast included in the room fee? Couldn't tell you. Will fresh fruit be available? That'll be a surprise. The problem is that in my copy you never know what's not said or not in the photograph. Lately, as best as I can tell, after close examination of the photo, the dusty fritters are made of commercial-grade plastics and high-speed chemical pigments. Who am I kidding? And my guess is yes fresh fruit will be available… at a price bordering on absurd. Stay

home! Hug your babies before they go off to war!

Calm yourself.

Our customers don't take the time to ask these questions. And it isn't our job to answer them; we cater to the impulsive. Because at a quick glance the cabaña looks beach-side to them, the fritters look delicious, and sunsets on the beach never let anyone down. Our ad copy is like that. I never know what I'm talking about based on experience. I just digress into images of worlds with pretty words that will sell a surface. And it'll never change. Like selling a war whose payload (WMDs) doesn't exist.

The problem is that it has to be that quick. Like fast food. No time to stop and think, just reactions, just react. Just stark illuminations. No mysteries. Too much overhead and lag time in mysteries. It can't satisfy the imagination long enough with its explicitness (for anyone) to feel satisfied, full but wanting more, and ready for a nap but not wanting to miss a thing. Sure, it does its job. Like porno or fast food or pixilated feeds of shock n awe. That's the point. It gets to the point. Does a job. Does adequate. Like viral porn clips and value fries. Hans Blix addressing the world. Appetites contritely settled in outer-bodily negotiations. Hands in pockets, fries in mouth. Soul always left hungry. Another problem is they (the reader/shopper) can most likely tell that I've never been to Tahiti or wherever. Why can't they tell I'm lying when I say how

beautiful the Tahitian sunset is? It's so obvious. But why should they care; they're in a hurry. They'll take anyone's word for it, even if my copy can't move beyond my lies and half-reactions to something that isn't mine: the subtle renderings, the notes, the responding glances, the voices, the images, the objects found and lost, the memory, the reactions to what someone else saw and told me about. Can't become something I saw or we (my imaginary soul mate and me) saw together. Felt together. Something that is mine, ours together. Our copy isn't that authentic; it's a half-lie. Always will be. I'm tired of it. I care too much. That's what it is. I need to experience something authentic. Like a holiday with family, the funeral of an honest man, or the birth of a loved one's first child. Let me write a story about that. A ritual and a birth, maybe a poignant death. Why should I care that they never notice that they should care to notice that I'm a virgin when it comes to watching four dead, earless presidents stare blankly (and deafly apparently) out over the Dakota horizon land. Why should I care to lie to strangers? The problem is that my Soul is getting hungry for something more truthful. I'm tired of lying. But lies pay the bills. So what can I do but sit in this cubicle/box and hammer away at our company lies? Story of my life…

Servers Go Down: A Catalyzing Event

REED SAYS ARAN ISLANDS. I say okay. The Web takes me there.

Reed says, "isn't it good to be working almost from the comfort of home. I mean we get to live and work and go to lunch and dinner and exercise and shop… all in the same building, and we rarely see the same stranger twice. Can't do that anywhere but here my man! YEAH! That's what I love about this job, Lon. It's like working on an island without anybody or their history, their emotional baggage, in your way. I haven't left this place in years, Lon, years! Except for meetings, which I don't count, since that's our secret. Most of my employs here know nothing of my past. I trust you understand the confidentiality policy of the LAFA House."

I say sure.

I need a better way to write. I need time and space. I need experience. I need a truth and a new pen. That's what I need. Yeah, a little fresh air wouldn't hurt. When I

start to get that suffocating sensation at the office I always head for the balcony, which is where most of the others smoke. But since I'm not a smoker I keep to myself on the other side, away from the smokers' outpost. Reed isn't a smoker either, so one day he joins me at the other end and we have a little business talk. I hint around that I need a change of pace so that I can keep my work fresh, keep selling travel upgrades like no one in company history, except Reed of course. I tell him I'm thinking of taking a new approach. Not sure what yet. But maybe something that requires me leaving my cubicle/box. He says the silly few feature writers who still do things the old fashion way— out in the field, away from home, outside the reach of network signal, in direct contact with the same characters day after day— are fools for all the time they waste going from place to place, back to the first place from the last or middle, then back again to the same person they'd already heard from a thousand times before— chasing the story across the country-side speculating on who did what when and where. Fools, he says. You think Coffer Black ever left his command post when he formulated the plan? *Be an insurgent from homebase.* You think running around like a headless hen works when they could be confirming all the ins and outs online: in the images, the facts, the local customs and rituals. *It's all there*, he says. *All of it. Free.*

"Sure," I say defeated-like.

"I ran with the bulls this morning, Lon. POV viral video feed baby! MeTube it! Chest-height camera dipping in-between those rogue locals drunk on cerveza and vino, side-stepping the adrenaline-junkies and the bullshit, catching the red silk scarves of pretty Spanish ladies from mid-air in slow motion, catching the admiration of the local youths, seeing the look of shock and awe on the faces of the tourists on the guarded sidelines. It was a rush man. And the best part is, Lon, I did it all from the comfort of my hi-def computer screen, in my Hoker Leather Chaise, the bulls and me, without the slightest fear that I was going to be trampled in the streets of Pamplona. Yeah, Lon… them old cats are poor fools. Look at us: clean and rich and having already saw what they saw! Been there done that, baby! Drone em all!"

I agreed, for the most part, out of a sheer lack of energy to rebut. At least on the bulls, anyway. Though I say I still can't get a good grasp on embedding the sense of time and place into my own small copy, which I feel they should have, like the old ads of yesteryear— see soda-pop ads of the fifties— regardless of what Reed thinks, though I never let on more than a hint to him that I feel this way. Job could be in jeopardy. Plus the man practically saved my life. If ad copy had room for

decent, well-informed, well-organized words and well-taken photographs, the shelf life of most ads would be much longer, I think. We wouldn't have to re-invent the wheel everyday. And if business got bad we could look to old copy and determine what worked then and might work again, use past ad copy models to predict what may work in the future… or now. At least we could know what not to do, at the very least. But that's the old way of thinking, Reed says. Forget all that. He says they're not important. People'll get it. Just make it more colorful, bigger and quicker.

Storage space on the web is infinite, he says. Just make it from scratch every time instead of digging through the past for working models of success. And for the longest time I thought he was right. I was right there with him. But I'm not so sure now. See, Reed's strategy (model copy philosophy he calls it) is that by re-telling and in some cases re-re-telling potential customers about fake 'real-time-place' stories of real 'things' and showing them hi-def pics of events in a pretend time and place (not actual vacay ritual events, but improvised-places-and-times type of events) very very quickly, a person can sell them on the idea of going there and seeing first-hand the events of these improvised times and places for themselves. I've already mentioned that to you so I don't suppose it needs repeating anymore now.

travel. Our success rate is in the ninety percentile range. But in order to tell a convincing story with the illusion of un-improvised time and place and sell these upgrades very quickly before the retail high of the initial vacation buy wears off (as Reed will confirm, he isn't totally against the semi-accurate rendering of time and place when it comes to making a sell, just not beyond the point of improvisation, so long as the customer can't tell the difference and pass on the upgrade) a little research has to be done. A small amount time has to be spent doing what I do before lunch. Nothing major. A thing— which not to sound vague, I have already mentioned Reed calls it a 'thing' too— we do on the World Wide Web. We are pioneers Reed says. Most companies send writers into the field to do stories of the locales they're selling. Authentically. Can't get that on the web. It'd take a lifetime in a place to accurately render the essence of what makes it unique to itself, and probably a high number of really thick books. But who has that kind of time these days? I'd like to know. My job would be far more interesting if I were constantly working on location. And I think my copy would reflect that sense of authenticity. Can't get that on the web.

Take for instance this piece of copy I did not long ago on the allure of the Southwest and the rituals of Navajo sandpainting. We decided (Reed and me) to publish the testimonial/back-story eBrochure under the pseudonym

What was I saying…?

Oh yeah… if the customers are already going to… wherever, which we know they are, well… we can do the same thing the vacation company did when they sold them the trip: we can sell them on upgrading their vacation package to include the best view of the re-reenactments money can buy. Simple as that. They'll buy on impulse alone. I've said it; you know it.

It's genius Reed says. Folks love to travel. Our success rate is in the ninety percentile range. But in order to tell a convincing story with the illusion of un-improvised time and place and sell these upgrades very quickly before the retail high of the initial vacation buy wears off (as Reed will confirm, he isn't totally against the semi-accurate rendering of time and place when it comes to making a sell, just not beyond the point of improvisation, so long as the customer can't tell the difference and pass on the upgrade) a little research has to be done. A small amount time has to be spent doing what I do before lunch. Nothing major. A thing— which not to sound vague, I have already mentioned Reed calls it a 'thing' too— we do on the World Wide Web.

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We wanted a local story of a "real" local person; we wanted to position him in the story as if he had grown up poor there in a small town (people will relate during times of near-economic-collapse). And now he (our brochure protagonist) wants others to see his home and how it (like him) rose from its tragic beginnings (a history of violent relations between Native Americans and European Inquisitors) to its current economic successes.

We thought this would be an easy sell to people interested in the history of the region. We never attach our names to business copy. It just gets fedto the aggregating service and pushed out onto the webs. Attahcing our actual names would ruin our thin veil of authenticity. Like the AP wire never attaches a name to its wire stories. Just AP Staff. We don't need folks pulling our

online profiles up to see that we, in fact, have never been to any of these places we say we have:

VISIT THE RED PAINTED SANDS CASINO AND RESORT: ORIGIN STORY OF THE FOUNDING OF THE RESORT: *Kirk Burroughs and Jeff Fireheart— two best friends a boy could have. Jeff's grandfather was a Navajo Holy Man— a sand painter. Jeff's dad liked to gamble and stay gone for days— in the desert, he'd say, looking for the place his father left the old sand cleared when he was finished, where he'd get together with the Elders and chant into The Great Circle. Out and away. But everyone and Jeff knew he was out in other ways, they'd always say, [out of his mind or out drinking his battered soul away.] Kirk's father was a minister and an investment banker. And later in life, after Jeff finally made it successfully out from under his father's heavy booze-addled shadow and embraced the heritage of his grandfather, Kirk (who'd gone into banking like his father) helped Jeff get the loan he needed to open the Red Painted Sands Casino and Resort at the foot of the Redder Rock Mountain range, the place his ancestors had once sat and told the history of life from the sand into the painting. Right exactly where you'll be looking if you'd like the upgraded view and full authentic demonstration of this ancient ritual: the gypsum, the ochre, the red sandstone pouring between the leathered fingers of The Medicine Man (Holy Man, some call him) until the last living grain has fallen into its place, and the Holy Man steps back to check the accuracy of his work: the chants telling of some age-old*

purpose: the absorbing of a tribe's illness, the foretelling of the unborn child, the formative dreaming, the perpetual creation of the timeless time of the healed ones: then the clearing of the sand before the next tour group arrives.

The rest goes on.

The rapid illusion of authenticity. Actual photographs have never been taken of such a ritual, as to not disturb the ceremony or fix in place what the Holy Man wipes clean. Illusion sells the upgrade. There are vivid images in the digital brochure: four Navajo Holy Men painting and clearing the sand for his brothers and sisters in front of an awed and wholly-transfixed gallery of on-looking gamblers and booze-hounds, slot machines in the background.

The Elder Mothers have already prepared the paint, which is waiting in ceremonial pots as the visitors file into the lobby area on a sanded red stone beside the boxed and cut-away 10x10 hogan where the sand is kept, and where later his people will sleep. There the Holy Men are waiting (appearing in mid-chant) for the crowd of on-lookers and passing gamblers to circle and grow silent. The looks on their faces suggest they are pleased they sprung for the upgrade, though perhaps they couldn't quite afford it right then but would figure all that out once they got back home. And again, like the rest of my eBrochures and ad back-stories, there is no sense of

time or place here. One can't tell the distance between the three Elder mothers. They don't know if two are made of wax and the other is an actress of Sioux descent, as they frequently are in these re-reenactments. From the brochure one can't tell the depth of the paint pots, the full dimensions of the sand box, the purpose of the hogan, the duration and silent magnitude of the ritual itself. One can't even tell if in fact there are four Holy Men together in ritual at all— or just one time-lapsed sequence of one acting Holy Man: a Cherokee actor broke from the Nation to pursue a career in cinema— a camera effect suggesting to the viewer that time is passing and he, like his people, is moving on. One can't tell that, in fact, the sand in the painting is constantly wiped and re-wiped clean. It is not one fixed image as it appears in the eBrochure. Few are aware that rituals like these have never been photographed. Because copy is instant, time and place quickly improvised to fit the eBrochure space. So I say it again because this is my problem with work: *no one can tell that the gestures and the movements of the Holy Man and the Elder Mother have never changed.*

Again, like Washington's rock brow, I've never witnessed a Navajo Holy Man paint the sand or a Navajo woman prepare the paint— their shared ritual for the healing of a newborn. So once again, I say, *my copy is lacking any real sense of time and place, no history to reference… or*

echoes to listen for. And since I know what the customer doesn't— that these pics have been staged— my brochures of the Southwest are like vacant dead air traps in a forgotten museum's broom closet. Time in ad copy isn't alive and breathing in all directions, it's fixed and linear. The places they show aren't real places, they're made from props. The people not made of stage wax are just actors, they have no kinship in this staged ritual. And this is what troubles me the most. Customers may never know that these things were once real, once existed outside a brochure of a re-reenactment.

I'm glad it's Friday. aran isles in the image search. I'm very glad I and those like me are on the verge of being replaced by AI. Wind-swept. Desolate. Authentic British Isles Sweaters made form Highland Merino. Lighthouses from Famous Books. The Land of the TV Immortals.

Come Monday I will have been working here for three years. That means as of today I have been sober for two years and 362 days… unless this was a leap year, in which case that would be two years 363 days sober. Not bad for Lonnie the Lawnmower. (Don't ask. Old nickname. I used to get so drunk in college I'd eat grass like dogs do to make themselves throw up. I'd vomit to make room for more.)

"Reed I'm out. I'll see you at meeting tonight. Don't forget it's Moses' birthday. He's 473 years young. I'm brin-

ing a box of adult diapers as a joke." "Alright Lon my man. Hey…"

"Yeah…?"

"Hell of a job on the Aran Islands. Wind-swept and desolate like a chick I once knew. Good stuff. She was a decent poet. My stuff was better of course, but I'd never tell her that. Better than the one we did a few years ago. Anyway, your write-up has already pushed three diamond-plus packages this afternoon. You keep on like this and I'm going to have to talk to Jerry about seeing if we can't give you a promotion… or at least a raise. Way to go my man."

"I tell you what Reed, we do the Aran Islands ever quarter it seems. Gklad someone is finally taking our word for it. The desolate and remote islands of yore."

"Yes!"

"Hey since you own this damn building and all, why don't you see if you can get my rent lowered. We'll call it even on the islands work. I'm thinking of pushing the Southwest again. We're sitting on a bunch of resos we got when the economy tanked. Why not sell a gambling trip during a recession? Baller status."

"No can do my man. I got nothing to do with that."

"You own the building Reed. O-W-N. Like, it's yours'. You could turn it into an adult bookstore if you wanted to."

"I know man… ain't that wild." Reed said laughing.

"Unreal."

Monday Morning

Coffee, web, HOTT locale.

Then Reed says, "Lonnie, do me a piece on The South— just a sweep to lure future attention to the area… for potential customer vacation upgrades."

"Reed… The Whole South?"

"Yeah, Lon. Find some event that defines the whole South."

"Alright. But it might take me awhile. I know nothing about it."

"Nonsense. Check the web. Not much happens there anymore. They still think they ought to have won the war. Hell probably think the earth is still flat, which it isn't btw. Won't take any longer than an hour or so."

"Seriously? Anymore? The planet just up and decided to embrace the third dimension?"

"Flatlanders, bro. Anti-evolutionist."

"It's the 21st Century, Reed. Dixie been dragged out of the dark since at least the 1960s."

"Hell yeah!"

*

Monday Afternoon

Servers went down. Staff went home.

Tuesday Morning

Servers in the building still down. Reed says, "Lonnie we're giving you a promotion, and there is a mandatory staff meeting Wednesday morning to announce it— to inform the staff of your first project since being given the new title."

"Do what?"

"Promotion, Lon. New responsibilities. You've earned it my man!" Everyone goes home.

Wednesday Morning

"As you all may or may not already know, Lonnie has been given a much deserved promotion. He gets to leave the office now. [*Shock and awe consumes the staff. Leave the office? Do what*?] And as a decision-maker now, his first task is to deliver good hard gloss copy on The American South by first thing Tuesday morning… remedy this little information shortage situation we happen to be experiencing at the moment. Servers down and all. The rest of you may have the weekend off, get out of the office for awhile… while the servers are down. Perhaps go to a museum or something outside the building. Wish Lonnie luck. And we'll see you all bright and early Tuesday morning to discuss his notes, pics, and whatever other material he sees fit to include in his research. Not that we'll use it all, but you know— You are dismissed."

"Reed… […]… how am I…"

This is exactly what I wanted before I knew of it being a real possibility. I wanted something new and now I got it. And it scared the shit out of me. I had no idea how to proceed with an assignment like this.

"You're guess is as good as mine, Lon my man," Reed said. "I guess you'll just have to go down there, like they did in the old days. Put it on company card, the travel expenses."

"You mean like one of those old fools we were talking about…? I mean we don't exactly see eye-to-eye on all copy related issues, you and me, but I have no idea how to do it that way. I know you don't. It's totally against your philosophy. Does anybody you know? ... […]… Well, if that's how it has to be, probably take a lifetime, uugghh— I guess I'll just— meh— Story of my life…"

Reed had already shut his door.

Wednesday Afternoon

I took the elevator to my 11th floor apartment, packed a week-end bag, caught a bus to Super Deal Car & Truck Rental, rented a comfortable sedan, drove across town to Stereo Stand and bought a hand-held voice recorder like the old war journalist use in black and white war reels we see sometimes of The Past Channel. I thought that might be a start to find out how they did it

back in the old days. I felt like a real journalist. I stopped and bought myself a new pair of jeans and boots, a 35mm camera (no digital on this trip), a road map (no GPS for me), two pens and a legal pad (I figured I'd hand-write the piece before typing it up)— then took off toward the American South, where I thought I'd write what I already knew about whatever I found on the first day and just relax until I had to go back to work on Tuesday morning… like the rest of the copywriters in the world do. It's just that I'd have to do the work in person now… like the rest of the travel writers and the fools in the world do.

[Red light on]

"This is Lonnie Edwards. I'm headed, this time the first, down to hop on Information Super Highway 40 to ISH 7-5 S to HWY 48 to 70 to write ad copy about another place I've never been. It just so happens I'll be a stranger in the land of my father. It's near 17:00, 13 June, 1st Century, 2nd Millennium, Year 1 in the field. Yeah, so let's call it Year 1."

Back from Vietnam, 1972:
A Narrative Flashback

I PASSED INTO THE land of my father, the land of the old ghosts, the land of the blessed hearts. Of all the stories he ever told me about it, as I was heading into that heavy air of the Deep South, only one could I seem to recall. The one of his return: Dale Edwards raised so much hell in boot camp on Paris Island when he got drafted that the Corps didn't want a thing to do with him after he got back. They wouldn't have called him back for a second tour if he was the last American boy physically able to stand without slobbering or shitting on himself. The feeling was mutual. He didn't need them either, he told everyone. So they (the federal employees, the un-deployed messengers of official bad news) said *find your own way home soldier. All the buses are full with new soldiers. We don't need you anymore. You're Done. We're finished with you. Not even one seat left on the bus.*

It was at the beginning, or was it the end (story changes every time), of humidity season in The South. The air was

gaining or losing weight and becoming visible or invisible to the naked eye. South Carolina never touches Tennessee, but if you'll stand where he stood and stare southeast down from the Smokies up around Cherokee and try hard to see the dividing lines between the Carolinas, Tennessee, and North Georgia you'll know right away that those lines have nothing to do with what's going on in the world at that moment. Those lines are imaginary. You can't see border lines on the earth or know you've crossed them like you can on a map unless someone points them out with a sign, a wall, a fence, or a battalion of posed child-soldiers holding their ground. So, if you find yourself as he did looking for your home's distinguishing lines, just remember as he would in time: you're already there wherever you are. Home is the place your mind and body meet the soul after a hard day's work in the killing fields, or elsewhere.

The rigors of war had toned his body— won't say of his mind— the Pacific sun darkened his skin. He was eager to see his family, his friends. But his mind set him wandering toward a place he should have never taken his body: out of his mind for a time, time out of mind... now that he wasn't getting shot at or humiliating himself with screams of terror and awe. These come naturally at first sight of the lifelikeness of the human cut-out targets in pre-combat training: close-quarter fire even more lucid

with humiliation. The unironic truth of combat-training course descriptions is just that— it isn't the language of a war.

A blonde and her brunette friend found him hitchhiking up through the Blue Ridge Mountains near Lake Junaluska— shirtless, tanned and handsome. Alive and back safe, unlike so many their age.

The car was red.

The top was down.

The radio wasn't loud and clear, it was fading in and out.

There must —way out — here Said the —to the — much confusion — get no relief [brakes squeal]— *drink my wine*

"I think you want some of the cheap young of California's vine, man."

"Sure do."

"How about a hit?"

"Absolutely."

"It's homegrown."

So they were the three of them, together on the road.

—my earth None of them — know — what — it is worth

"What's it go for here?

"Huh? No. That ain't what the song's about."

"Fifteen a four-finger lid."

"Oh, yeah, it's whatever you want it to be looker-man."

No reason to — he — spoke — so — here among us — Life

— *a joke* [hahahaha, he thought half-wickedly, cinematic]

"I'll tell ya'll what's funny. Before I went over there— I never thought much about the contrasts in this life— like why the Hell is this illegal and that not? War tools, that is. They ought to be worried about the man-made poisons and let the earth bring forth what it will and regulate itself, its cycles, accordingly. I've seen a spray that'll eat the leaves off a tree in three hours flat. No exaggeration. The only way this, not that, could kill you is if a hard compressed ton of it fell off the front loaders of a fork lift and you happen to be an unsuspecting dock worker standing right under it. What a way to go, squashed to death under a ton of it. But then again, it'd still probably be better than getting dosed with a chemical that eats up all your parts like them trees, you know, turns your own body (your leaves against your trunk so to speak) against itself. It's better than your body pulling a Benedict Arnold on your soul, cutting itself off and taking with it your mind too. Better than treason. Better than dying under the ever-so-cautious-for-our-health-and-safety-hands of our father's elected officials, don't you think?"

"A Southern Conservative Hippy Soldier? Kind of a contradiction don't ya think?"

"Not a bit. You wait. When all them boys get back you'll see. In ten years or more you'll see. They'll be eve-

rything every kind of way: Hippies with machetes, bikers at confessional, squares on acid, psychotics cool as cucumbers, sociopaths with hearts of gold, idiots on the brink of curing brain cancer, megalomaniacs humble as nuns, wimps fighting for pleasure, murderers of murderers for murder, sober preachers with whiskey on their breath, agnostics believers on Sunday morning, husbands of knives, fathers of invisible children, unmarried wife-beaters, homosexuals turned straight, heterosexuals turned gay, bisexuals turned off, transsexuals re-defined by definition, asexuals sexed, generals made specifics, vice versa. One of those lunatics'll the president maybe someday if he don't dodge. I'll stop there. Everything. Ya'll won't even know what from what, who from who, where they came from to begin with, or where they once called home. They'll be from the South, the West, the North Pacific, Central Maine, Hawaii, the New Mexico desert land, Nantucket, Harlem, Watts, the Dakotas, the Great Plains, L.A., The Swamp, Chinatown, the Sierra Nevadas, the Rockies, Music City, The Big Easy, Appalachia, the Aleutian Islands, the Caribbean, Everywhere America and beyond— and they'll think they won't have a thing in common with each other more so than they were in a war together once. That's the natural contradiction of it, the paradox of surviving a war. They'll have so much in common to talk about they'll grow to resent

each other because inside they already hate themselves—they'll become reclusive to avoid even the smallest gatherings of that kind of people they've grown to hate. Or they'll do the opposite and huddle together to talk about the war because as long as they're talking about it it's still going on; as long as it's still going on they're still fighting; and as long as they're still fighting in the heated moment of battle they'll never have time to consider the far-reaching effects of that war. It's easier for them that way. Because this war is going to be that much to these people, especially when it's over. Maybe not all wars. But this war no doubt, stake my life on it. Hitler and Mussolini and those guys gave our fathers something legitimately evil to legitimately fight against, I say. Individual human lives were smaller than the cause at that moment in history. Those lives we may even go as far as to say were not lost in vain, but found as an offering in the fight for love over evil. Future prosperity was actually at stake then. Not now. It's not like that anymore. Where is the evil that evil? We didn't see it. We saw the horrors of a senseless war, not just the horrors of war. When all them boys and girls get back you'll see what I mean. Not one ever for the rest of their days here, not under the harshest torture or most powerful mind-controller known to man, not ever will any one of them say, not for love or wealth or absolute power or fame, not for anything (not even God

if they believe) will you ever hear any of them say ever that they really truly believe that the Conflict in the Republic of Vietnam was a fight worth fighting. Not one. Whoever said war is war no matter which way you look at it, that all wars are the same, never listened to the veterans and what they thought. Ask an American WWII Vet and an American Vietnam Vet this simple question about their own wars: 'Looking back, is the outcome of the fight worth what was sacrificed?'— you'll see what I mean. One will matter-of-factly be saying before you've even finished the question 'Of course it was, evil needed removing, the bombs had to be dropped, evil had to know, Hitler had to be stopped not for the sake of conflicting political ideologies but for the sake of preserving love and human understanding between different peoples deserving freedom from extinction. It had to be done.' The other will be me in silence in the backseat of your car asking myself the same question, knowing I already know the grim truth of the answer. I wake crying at night thinking how the little boy with the bombs on his chest will never go back to that room left just the way it was when he left his mother's house. She'll never be home again either…"

In intervals like a soldier's heart beats, tears were marching down his face.

[Dear reader: It's still too early to understand, emo-

tionally, what this war will do to them and us. Do not mistake their light-hearted tone and naïve worldview here for a lack of anything they should feel about it, any emotion or particular rhetorical distance. Right then. Right now in this story. They're just happy to be alive, and safe.]

She thought of what he said. The passenger girl with brown curly hair thought to say something in response but didn't, and so in silence the scene played out between them in her mind: "Awww …(sincere compassion and empathy)… I love your heart already. [she tears up] That's a gentle-hearted Southern boy for ya. Momma said that's how ya'll are. Sensitive and stubborn to hide the signs of it. Real true *Gone With the Wind* clichés. I'd let you cry unashamed every time with me in my bed. You can cry every time for him, the man that was Hell bent on killing you and all your friends, the man you shot. Crying is good some of the time, not all the time, but some. Now is perfect. Don't you let yourself cry unashamed in front of others if you really have to cry, or do you hide it? There were men like that weren't there? [she thought to say 'men,' and he would've thought to say 'no, there weren't men like that, in fact, only boys'] I admire that. How tragic a life to lose the sense of the beautiful in humans, and I can say it like that because I'm here and after-the-fact, and using words like beautiful loosely in a

conversation about war, even though it's still going on and doing its best to rid the world of beautiful things. I am after-the-fact, outside the fact. Because you boys don't have a choice on going or not, neither do they, it is their country after all. What choice would we have if someone came in whether we wanted them here or not, and how many of their soldiers like ours would take our sense of home-protection as hostility, even though we were here to help, like they were the invaders and we the natives, and did they never know why they were there either? Like us? I saw reports on the TV news, like they'd drafted ya'll to kill their own sons— when it wasn't their fault why we were— whatever— for whatever reason… why we were where we were. If I'd been a boy and drafted and met and fought beside you I'd bet I'd be crying forever in my heart now too, for them too… and I am for you, forever. And we're gonna cry together and separate, in private and in public, alone and in a crowd, for years to come because of all this. This war isn't over. Long from it. And it would've been better if I'd just not said anything at all about it and got you so upset in front of strangers— so we wouldn't sound so young and naive in our attempts to understand and relate to an old un-nameable thing, a changing world, that by its very nature resists both, to be related to or named— both absolutely. So I'll not mention it again, but say if you need to talk about it with

someone I will listen and do my best to understand." And she did; she hadn't said a word.

War Between the Pines: Dale's 1st Nightmare

THEY ALL CRIED TOGETHER, silent but in the music of their time, as they crossed the Smokies— headed toward the gap beneath Clingman's Dome— and descended from the Appalachian Mountains into the foothills of Tennessee. He was staring off into the distance out the right side of the car where there would have been a passenger-side window had the top not been down, cliché-nostalgic-like stares into nothing tangibly there.

He pictured not peaceful forest but a war being fought between the red oaks, the pines, the tulip poplars, the walnuts. The hardwoods of his native land. Military divisions in the natural terrain.

He pictured scorched gouges in the sides of old earth hills, hollows blown flat from long-range attacks, farm houses wrapped in phosphorous and fire.

He pictured big bombers sweeping just over the pines. Bodies in the wide shoals of a chilly fast-moving river, side creeks' water turning red. Blistered American children

running naked down rutted mountain highways, clothes having just been burnt away from their bodies. Parents dead in a rainbow-defoliant-cleared roadside meadow, under the rainbow a scorched earth, which he pictured flourishing again with switch grass and wildflowers fifty years or so after the end of the fighting, in the places where the blood of the four million or so killed in the conflict once muddied the earth.

—we've been through that — our fate So — not talk — it's getting late.

He loved one of them already as they drove into the Appalachian sun. Her dark hair maybe reminding him of a place he'd never been before.

He quit picturing a war on American soil and thought of Spain, dozed off thinking of Spain, and dreamt of Spanish rain coming down beside him:

It's the night he and Isabelle leapt intoxicated off the edge of the earth and into the sea, diving into the surf together, and coming up for air between the waves where she could kiss him and promise to take him into the arena the next morning. Two bodies bobbing in the tide absolutely certain that tomorrow the sun will rise and they will still be floating together.

—The bull would enter the arena at noon, not a moment too late, not a moment too soon. Because that's

where he went all the time (out of his mind in some kind ecstatic mediated suspension) even for his first and only R&R leave during his two tours of duty in the Republic of Vietnam.

"Water has legs and dances again and again and sometimes makes you jealous the way it moves through us all, even before we begin to construct our heritage, the word we will call it by, we are wrapped inside our mothers in it. Water. I wish I were moving constantly like water— not stuck here— of no form but rhythm and life."

I was born on a country lane in the last great wilderness around, the Deep South. My grandfather collected Lionel trains. I was the conductor and he was my right-hand man— pinstriped overalls, matching hat, and two cans of pomade (in case he lost one).

His hair was perfect. Mine was dark brown and curly. Daddy made me cut wood, and sometimes I would fall asleep under a cottonwood tree, or beneath the skirt of an old magnolia, and dream of Granddaddy asking Daddy if I could take the next few tomorrows off, and he says yeah, sure, tell him to do whatever he wants with them so long he kisses his momma's cheek every morning when he wakes up and comes to the breakfast table.

I'm dreaming again, of home and other things.

"Do you serve ice water?"

"This is a Spanish Bullfight, my good man; we take water at its temperature. And our beer too." His English was suspiciously clear and fluid, which was unsettling at the time. I looked up; he was American Military. Odd for this setting.

"I'll have three. Tres para mi."

My Spanish was broken and terrible at best. But I had no need to use it. Don't even know why I tried. All seated we awaited the next show. Everyone was there. I only hope there is enough water for the bulls.

"*I see you enter the arena, toreador— my hallucination, Venus de Milo in the corner with his faces on the sand. Statues on the arena floor. Flamenco shadows. All shadows on the arena floor. Your flamenco shuffle floats in some kind of keen elegance.*

"Your cape and spear revive the crowd. You are rousing the Prince of Spain. I suspect some heir of royal blood, wealthy at least. And I am only a visitor to his beautiful land. Better than a captive, no worse than a native.

"I am here to applaud in the spirit of competition, but make no mistake about it Mr. Milo— unlike you— I am rooting for the bull. You host me here, but I root on for the opposition dead set on goring you into the arena sand and putting a stop to the hypnotic whirl of your disguise.

Why? To revive the crowd with the spectacle of live death. That's why. Because he was here before you were. Between you and

me, this land is yours. But between you and the bull. It's always been his. Always will be…"

Before the fight… for the bull no water. Descending the stairs to the arena floor, I was floating. I am floating. Still. I lost. Paranoid. There is no water for the already dying bull?

Soon I will leave this land, and return to the rice patties, the river deltas, the LZs, the Saigon broken streets, the quick hot silent jungle we call to. Quick to turn on you. Quick to burn us out. The most terrifying sound in war: Silence. The hot jungle turning cold. Silent. Bombs and bullets confirm that the fight is on, so the terror turns to the noise of combat, we are here and they are here, and we are fighting, and everyone knows it.

Silence says, *they may be here, and we may be there, they may already be dead, or never there, us either, but still never anywhere else, this may be our own 'never there,' or maybe that silence is coming from a buddy of ours as he lay beside us there, bleeding out from where the crown of his head parts his hair… silence spilling out from the mingling landscapes of a War on the periphery, a war over there* [taps center of forehead with his middle finger] *the war in here. That silence may be our own bleeding crown parting our hair.*

Where am I when water is born? Where will I be? In a bleeding crown atop the head of the Jesting Prince of

Spain? Over the body of a dying bull? No? At War? Over my own body? His crown atop his head? Almost home? Cutting cord wood?

I woke again. Why Spain?

Ghost LZs: Dale's 2nd Nightmare

The heat of this humidity is most definitely having an effect on my dreams. I keep dozing off and slipping into this hallucination of past experiences and meshed images of old black and white movies, paintings, books, and all things Vietnam.

The fever dreams are more bizarre and hotter than usual. No community grace here in this dream. The radiation has heated the particles of my brain, slinging them rapidly and randomly together, almost like guest bullets in a TV sitcom about TV death—

But then: Shock and Awe. Where Empires go to Die. Shock & Awe. Th Cradle of Civilization. SHOCK-N-AWE. Is it still 1969? 2003? Wait a minute. My God, where— how many years have we been here, were we there, I mean, do I ? Did I? Did I take my R&R leave in Spain, thousands of miles from the Valley of Khe Sanh (10 – 15 miles south of the DMZ unlocking the riddle of

Khe Sanh)? No to both questions, I don't believe so. We retook Khe Sahn and I won the lottery after Tet. So, No. Not. At. All. I wasn't at the Valley of Khe Sanh in '68, I was up the Mighty Piney River in Pinewood, TN. Never Spain. But still—

I did in fact root for the dying bull in early 1970. But it was just a TV image. It was only fractions of light invading the back side of my sleeping-on-the-job fool, the conscience-redactor behind my outward boyish appearance. I remember now. It was the coward at the ice cream parlor near the USO stage. He said they were airing a bull fight that evening after the show and a bullfighter is suppose to die. No doubt a bull or two. And I went to the rec. hall to get a beer and catch my flight to Manilla. Though it never crossed my mind at the time, whether the bulls had had enough to drink before they were forced into the spectacle of death.

Cotton mouth came over me. Goose bumps you get when you know something is absolutely, beyond a shadow's doubt true by all accounts and about to happen all at once right before you. I knew the bull would die just like VC in the valley. Just like Charlie in the trees. It's tradition. But I cheered him on anyway. Almost like sometimes I cheered them on for putting up such a fight in hand-me-down pajamas. I smiled at their ambition because they were like me and mine.

I thought of the fight I'd fight to preserve the hardwoods of the South, what I'd do and who I'd kill for the great Red Oak in my momma's backyard. They fought like hell for rice and opium.

But what death is not certain? In a hundred years or more that oak will be just like those South Vietnamese Palms and Acacias. Blood-tindered.

What makes a person pull for what will be a certain failure? I was in a small fishing village outside Manilla in the Philippines. That's where I was all along, and I did watch a young man on the TV try to side-step the last charge of a dying bull. I've never been to Spain, but I was there then. Not in body, but out from mind.

One thing war gives a person while they're in the middle of it: the ability to dream yourself away from it, to escape it in mind for a time. Even a nurse who has never seen combat can see that on a dying soldier's face. And when they're out of it, always against their will can they only dream they're back over there… always will be.

Or the war has come home with them, it's in their backyard and between their eyes, under their fingernails and in their hair, it's stuck to the roof of their mouth— so what's the difference?

[Setting: Battlefields across the world, LZs in Indochina, Hangers on American Military Bases, The Theatre of

the Mind: I am dreaming the Conflict in Vietnam will last at least fifty more years, and when my tour is up I'll be old and grey. I won't be able to stand any longer. And when I walk across the LZ to the Huey and then through the hanger to the C-130 for the last time heading home, a feeble grandfather figure, I'll pass young boys loading a cargo plane, nervous anticipation across their faces. I'll be sure it is their first tour, and that they won't be coming home for at least another fifty years or so, if then. When I see them they will see me, and none of us will be able to speak to warn the others of what (they don't kow but) I know about where they are going and where we just came from, LZ Ross, LZ Dang, Charlie Chan in the quick hot tight jungle tubes waiting for the napalm to burn off his black pajamas. 'Boku chop chop.'

We will all know that this is our moment to be silent, the moment we mourn each other's deaths, all of them— the moment that everyone sort of understands that each one of us is going to die, in battle, peacefully laughing in our sleep in Tennessee, or elsewhere— and we half-smile and nod. This is what we choose. What our fathers gave us. And still we don't fully understand. And it's mutual, hereditary even.

We see them and pretend they'll be us one day. It's how we get on with it. They see us and have hope that they'll be us one day. It's how they get on with it. Alive. Withered

but living, hard to know, and near-impossible to love. Them and us. Hard to know which ones will be us, and which ones will be them bleeding from their crowns. Which ones will never be crowned, but lost or stolen by jungle heat and radiation under the rainbow— left to wander there looking for the rumored ghost LZ where the homebound Huey is suppose to be waiting.

Before they know it, they'll have wandered out through a clearing of years and scorched earth. The tropical Indochina trees will part and the tight wet jungle will lead them to the desert, Central Asia. Their camos will be digital and the color of sand. They'll still be young as the day they left home decades before, and they'll join into a holy battle that is already in progress, and seems to have always been. Call them MIA or POW, (KIA if we've failed them). But don't call them lost or left behind.

Hard for them in the hanger to know that we are only a portion returning of the whole that deployed, the providence portion picked to grow old in the middle of a war, when we left decades before they were ever born, still not yet in the loins of American princes, decades before their war began to unravel them for the world to see in high-definition video feeds, before Uncle Sam moved them to another battlefront theatre years after the prime of their lives has passed them by— before they were overlooked on stage for the last dance with Miss America. Before for-

ever.

[Lights fade down on the scene. Slowly they'll rise as the cast enters down stage left and down stage right: We pass by one another carrying the same load, heading in the same direction. They just don't know it yet, the audience stares in silent awe. And shocked, we can't even tell ourselves that this is our curtain call. So we pinch ourselves, squeeze the trigger, and exhale—]

"Wake up, Dale. It's Middle Tennessee. You're home."

"Aww… man, don't stop here. Let's go to Champlain. Dylan's playing a show there Friday night."

Dale Edwards would end up raising his family somewhere else.

I wasn't born or reared in the South like my father was, or his grandfather. And he never took us there when he was young. Everyone always came to visit us. Somewhere in the nowhere Midwest. Where Dad landed after the war. That's where they stayed.

Home reminded Dad of war, because it was the place he longed for when he was away.

Home.

But home didn't change a bit the years he was gone, like he had.

Everything was exactly the same.

He could picture himself there before he had left for

boot camp, before he had graduated, before he had gotten his driver's license, before he started school or cuttin' wood even. So he said, 'Hi excuses.'

He could transport himself back to those places when everything was simple and the war was very far away, yet to begin. And that's the problem he'd say of home, his excuse:

"I picture myself there as a child, and while for most folks those may be happy times, they can't be for me now. They used to be. Maybe again sometime. But not anymore, not now. Because when I look back and see myself innocent and having fun back in the place where I was born, like when me and my brother Darcey first got to kiss the Williams sisters on the front porch of the Pineknot General Store, when he was 13 and I was 11— I know now what I couldn't have known then but think now that I did know then anyway, that eight years after that fateful spring, the spring of my first kiss, I'll be going to fight the War in Vietnam, and I'll never be kissed that way again. When I think back to times like those, I convince myself that I knew all along, that I knew the day I was born, and that all that youthful fun was just a diversionary tactic to delay the inevitable. I always knew, every thought, every action from age one to nineteen anticipates the war. My first kiss becomes my last, a somber moment. Little league baseball becomes a crash course in tossing

hand grenades. Cutting cord wood is like loading a long-range artillery shell and every camp fire looks exactly like napalm. My childhood becomes a waiting room for growing old too quick, and beyond those walls of time and dreamy years lays a jungle battlefield full of elderly kids like me. Cold War Kids who got hot as hell. All that innocence null and void. *I was born a soldier. This dream kills commies—*

"Because when I think back to as far as I can remember, I always know now that I always knew from the day I was born that I would have to go fight somebody else's war. It makes me wish they'd have left me in the jungle. Times now I think I could use the rest."

*

He's been dead five years now, and I got a job to do. I can't dwell on him or his life anymore, else I'll never have one of my own. I can't fight that war. I've already been in The American South for longer than I'm even aware of. Hundreds of miles already and I haven't seen even one square inch of it yet. Been lost in my mind thinking of him and that war that did him in over thirty years after he returned. Poisoned by the rainbow. Burned by the Cold War.

Vietnam is a top tourist destination now, despite ungodly levels of concentrated dioxin-9 in the southern forests. I suppose that's what wars and hardships can do to a people

and a place if they survive— normalize and turn into a damn tourist trap, a bad memory with a steep entrance fee.

The first sign I see says, '*See the historic township of River Grove, take a trip down memory lane. Next three exits.'* The second, '*Ya'll don't miss the Old Timers Day Parade, 3rd Saturday in May.*' The last, '*Eat at Thelma's Lunch Box, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, exit now.*'

I suppose this place is as good as any I'm bound to find. Get ready River Grove, you'll be the newest HOTTEST tourist locale on the web by the time AMTROPETA and R.C. Bohanan are through with you.

#OTDParade. Search that.

4

The_American_South_ Field_Notes

[SB 09-80/4-6]

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At The Lauraline Motor Inn

RIVER GROVE WHERE THE hills kiss the sky. Where every star reflects off the river. Where no one is a stranger. Welcome Home! the sign reads, as Lonnie got off the highway and pulled into the little town. *I suppose this place is as good as any. Kind of looks like Mayberry. If only I were color blind so I could see this place in old black and white.* Not paying much attention to anything in particular as he took the little place in— the old pre-war buildings, the Georgian architecture, the old-gentlemen-filled benches on every corner, the courthouse from the late 1800s in the center of the bustling town square, the antique malls, the little cafes, the full service gas stations, the local grocery store, the hometown video rental outlet, everything seemingly locally owned (no big-box influence in sight)— he didn't realize the flashing blue and red in his rearview. Great, he thought, here comes Sheriff Taylor now. He adjusted his mirror to get a better look at the officer. *No,*

I'm sorry, it's Fife. Andy must be over at Aunt Bee's for lunch.

"Sir, you ain't from 'round heren 're ya?"

"How could you tell?" A hint of sarcasm that went overlooked by the officer slipped out of Lonnie's mouth.

"Well, your plate says California. You got a Hollywood sticker in your back winder there. It didn't take me long to put two and two together... you know, to make four. Besides, folks from River Grove usually drive under the speed limit around the square ever since Old Man Jenkins got clipped by Parker Holt there in front of Selva's Antique Emporium. That and what happened this year to Merel Gene of course.

"Everybody's been real cautious ever since. Truthfully town's still in shock. We can't believe he's actually gone. It ain't been but about a month now I don't guess. Happened during the parade. Mort's still…," he trailed off, realizing he was talking to Lonnie like he was a local and knew the whole story about what had happened just a month before. "But I can't expect that from you, being from out of town and all. You couldn't know how we do things 'round here."

"Yes sir. I'm just here on business. Doing a story about the allure of small towns in the American South. Just doing some scouting you might say."

"Like location scouting? And you picked River Grove? Well I'll be. It's about time Hollywood folks caught on to

what we got here."

"Yes sir." Lonnie said, not sure what else to say, since he wasn't really from Hollywood, and certainly wasn't doing any kind of Hollywood scouting like the officer seemed to think he was.

"Oh yeah— ever since reality TV started getting real popular we been a-saying it was just a matter of time before some big TV exec landed in The Grove. Then Boom! They'd want to turn this place into a big hit. See, I figure what people like to see on TV nowadays is something new and authentic, something they ain't seen before. It ain't got to be glamorous or anything as long as it's interesting. That's why reality TV is so big these days. It's real life, know what I mean. I knew once them gator boys down in the bayou got their own show it wouldn't be long fore we got ours'. You gonna do the whole town or you just gonna focus on a few local families? "

"Oh, no sir. I ain't from TV. I just write—"

"Say no more. Say no more," he interrupted. "Your secret's safe with me. My lips are sealed. I know how you TV folks got to keep the lid tight on new projects so the competition don't catch on and beat you to your own idea. Let's just pretend this never happened. Listen I ain't gonna ticket you because, well, just be careful when you're tooling around town okay. This way it looks like I don't know a-thing about what you're doing here, and I'm just doing

my job keeping the town safe and all, informing the out-of-towners how we do things 'round here. But you know I know that I ain't suppose to know anything about what's up, so let's just pretend I don't know anything more about you other than you're here to finish up a story about small towns in the South. And if you need help on your story, wink wink, you just come on down to the station and ask for Jones. That's me. Or Jonsie, some call me that. I'll help you scout out places for your show… I mean story, your story. If you need help scouting or anything like that."

"Thank you, Jones. I'll keep that in mind. But I really am just working on a story. No show."

"Oh sure, sure. All the way from Hollywood just for a story. Could've just used that world network to work on your story, wink wink. But I got ya. Lips sealed." Jones made a locking motion in front of his mouth, then threw away the invisible key.

"Say, Jones. Where's a good place to stay in this town?"

"Well, we only got two places really. I'd stay at the Lauraline Motor Inn if I was you. The other place has a rough barroom attached to it, The Maude Fireside Lounge. It ain't that bad but— well let's just say they rent rooms there by the hour over at The Maude."

"Where can I find the— that first place you said?"

"Just go on around the square here and head back toward the highway. Make a left on Short Mountain Road— No, no, I'm sorry. Make a right on Short Mountain, then a left on Cardinal Street. Go straight until you pass the farmer's co-op, then Thelma's, then the old Haddox Hatchery and Feed building (the one with the old mini silo), then on up a piece from there there'll be a pink elephant in front of a car lot.

"On past that a piece you'll see signs that'll take you right to it, the Lauraline. Ah… the Lauralin brings back old memories just thinking about it. You tell Elsie, the pretty lady at the front counter, that Ol Jonsie sent ya. She'll take good care of you. Ah— ol Elsi—"

"Jones. Officer Jones—," Lonnie said.

"Yes'sir, sorry bout that. Old memories, you know…"

"Officer Jones I just wanted to thank you for all your help, especially for not ticketing me. My company per diem doesn't cover legal expenses. That would have come out of my pocket. And I just don't have that kind of cash to spend on speeding tickets."

"Oh don't thank me. We ought to thank you. No telling what your story may do for River Grove. Tourism liable to boom. Jobs may move in. Never can tell. But like I said if you need anything at all you just come on down to the station." Jones said again.

"Will do. Will do. So just around the square here and

back down that way?" Lonnie asked again.

"Yes sir. You can't miss it. Our town ain't very big but it's home. I know darn near everyone in town. Darn near the whole county. Just come on down to the station any time," Jones said yet again. I'll be damned if I'm willingly going into any police station, friendly or not, invited or not. I've had enough of those places for the rest of my life, help or no help. I'd soon get fired as to go into any police station looking for a story.

The Lauraline Motor Inn was modeled after a tropical estate manor from the early twentieth century Caribbean. One you might find dilapidating in a non-tourist district of Key West, overlooking a sad beach cove covered in rotting seaweed and jellyfish. The roof is a fading sea foam green made of cracking clay shingles not meant to persist in the Deep South humidity and the long cold winters. One or the other, but not both.

Its lobby doors resemble those found in the front foyer of an old Spanish villa. Cortez would have been proud, under certain absurd pseudo historical circumstances. A tropical mosaic adorns the floor: a burnt sepia sun that looks more like a wilted, crispy dandelion dying in the desert is surrounding a three-tiered roman fountain filled with old pennies stained with hard water and algae. The place is an architectural hodgepodge of poor aesthetic decisions. It was obviously built years before

Lonnie was born. Lonnie was, needless to say, taken back as he passed through the lobby. The name hadn't prepared him for what he was witnessing. Why not name the place The Villa Suites of The Grove, or something that suits the design? Why not match form with content and purpose— though at the time its exact, original purpose in River Grove perhaps could've eluded even the most savvy historian, sociologist, or anthropologist.

What were they thinking? Of course it was meant to provide lodging to travelers. But the original builders/designers obviously had something else in mind when they constructed a two-star (at best) Greco Roman-Spanish-Caribbean inspired pseudo resort in the middle of nowhere in the America South. Have the citizens of River Grove been for years secretly hoping to attract the attention of the rest of the continent? Did this sleepy little town always have bigger dreams of becoming a tourist trap? So many places like this look to preserve their local heritages and keep outsiders away.

Did River Grove want the exact opposite? Lonnie couldn't answer those questions right then. All he knew as he walked through the lobby that first time past the dandelion fountain was that for whatever the Lauraline was— architecturally speaking (an old ill-informed resort or a designer's worst nightmare)— the name certainly hadn't prepared him for what he was seeing. Lauraline

Motor Inn suggests a place more akin to a small town truck stop, something with a bit more prideful local sleaze. Or maybe not even that. No, not that at all.

As Lonnie made his way around the square with the name of the place in mind he thought of something far more sinister than an old truck stop.

He was reminded of a place in Memphis, Tennessee (a place not too far away): a place in his father's home state: a place that still wears the wide stain of shame where a wreath hangs from the railing on the second-story balcony: a place that ceased renting rooms on a brisk, windy day in 1968.

But this wasn't his father's South. This wasn't even his father's country. The name Lauraline Motor Inn conjured no such images in anyone except the most ardent student of history and language. That place in Memphis wasn't called the Lauraline Motor Inn, but it was close. And when history and language mingle in a person's mind like Lonnie'S, the connections can't help but be made when one finds themselves looking for lodging in the Deep South.

Still, a sense of responsibility and shame came over him. His father was from the South, not two hundred miles from that wreathed balcony. So in his own convoluted way, Lonnie felt that it may have been him that pulled the trigger. Both triggers. The one that killed Dale

Edwards, and the one that killed that peaceful reverend in 1968, decades before he (Lonnie) was even born.

But that's nonsense, he thought. Lauraline is just Lauraline, Lonnie told himself as he sought out the place he'd make his headquarters for the next several days and nights in River Grove. It isn't that other place. This isn't Memphis; not even the same state he didn't think.

(River Grove straddles the line; it's in two places at once). And Dale did what he thought he had to do. What he needed to do.

By the time Lonnie found the Lauraline, his mind was racing over a hundred miles per hour. He'd thought nothing but nonsense, guilt and shame nonsense. So he told himself to breathe. And he did. Then he took one look at the place and began to laugh.

It wasn't the Ritz-Carlton but at least they didn't rent rooms by the hour, and continental breakfast and wi-fi access are included. So he couldn't expect much more in a little place like River Grove. As long as he reminded himself that this wasn't his father's South he'd be fine. No guilt. No shame. What's done is done, and he hadn't done a thing. Not yet.

XXVII

"ONE, PLEASE. CALIFORNIA KING. if available."

"Smoking?"

"No ma'am. Elsie? Are you Elsie?"

"Who's asking?"

"Oh, I just met Deputy Jones and he told me to ask for Elsie and tell her that he sent me here."

"Billy said that did he? Well," she half smiled, "that's me. Elsie Anne Meyers in the flesh. What brings you to River Grove? And what else did Billy say about me?"

"Work. I came for work. And he didn't say much else. He did call you pretty though."

"Oh that William. Well, since William sent you and you're here for work, I'll give you the best rate I can."

"I appreciate it ma'am."

"Room 117 has a Cali King and a mini fridge. It's got a Jacuzzi too. It's a non-smoking room, but since you know my William I'll overlook it if you happen to slip up and forget."

"Oh, no worries. I don't smoke cigarettes."

"Well, if you do… Anyway, how long will you be with us?"

"Not sure yet. Just keep me listed as a guest until I let you know otherwise. I'll give you at least fourteen hours notice before I check out."

"That'll be fine honey. Anything for a friend of my William. I swear that boy'll be the death of me if I let him. And I just might too, if you know what I mean. See me and Billy used to stay in 207, the honeymoon suite. But that's neither here nor there—"

Lonnie didn't care to know all this small-town gossip. But he didn't have much choice. Elsie hadn't given him his key cards yet, so he was at her mercy. It wouldn't take him long to learn that just about everyone in River Grove has a story to tell if you let them. And since everyone knows everyone just about, everybody knows everybody's stories too.

Essentially, if one had enough time, the whole history of River Grove could be learned just by listening. Of course, everyone would have a different version to tell each time they told it, depending upon mood and time of day, among other things. Around the courthouse like dark pink blazes lit against a navy blue curtain-draped sky, the redbuds had just reached full bloom. Scattered here and there around the square were the wind-swept collections

of white petals off the Bradford Pears.

The air was heavy with human voices, giving Lonnie the impression that River Grove was much more populated than it truly was. What a marked difference. Millions of people pass daily through the streets of L.A. silent of actual communication, oblivious to the fact that others are within arm's distance of them: in lines for espresso, traversing the sidewalks, jogging in place at the health clubs, waiting for the bus to take them away. So many people to talk to and yet the smoggy air in the city of angels is absent of meaningful conversation. So many people that people cease to be people. They become hooks on which to hang one fleeting trend or another. It's all city noise and chatter.

When people talk, and they do, they talk to themselves. They talk at others as a means of talking to themselves, because no one is more interesting to talk to than themselves. Here in The Grove people actually have conversations with one another.

Lonnie was taken back at first. But in time he settled in, took out his pen and legal pad and began to record everything he heard and saw. His first afternoon in River Grove gave him an intimate look at the town it really was, the town it was when no one was looking: like when people are alone they act one way, and when they know someone is looking they act another.

That first afternoon, River Grove acted like no one was looking. But overnight everything and everyone changed. The town looked like a movie set the next morning. The people all looked like extras in a big budget movie. While life carried on as it would on any given day, just below the surface of life was the unnatural buzz of voyeurism. Everyone seem to act as if they were being watched but pretended not to notice. They seemed to like the idea of being watched and pretending not to notice, as if they were acting naturally like they would naturally act. Life carried on as usual, but anyone with half a brain could sense that something was there, some presence, some omnipotent force guiding every detail of the life of the town and its people, like at any moment everyone was going to break out in a song and dance they all already knew by heart.

This isn't the town I arrived in the day before, Lonnie thought the morning after the day he arrived. Somehow it changed. Changed how? It would take a group of renown sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, and lord knows who else to answer that question any further than what's already been mentioned. He couldn't say for sure, Lonnie couldn't, but something was different.

Lots of things really, grouped under the umbrella term: life. Suffice it to say that word must have gotten around that Lonnie was in town. Jones must have told

someone that told someone that told someone that told someone else that there was going to be a TV show made about River Grove, that someone famous was in town to do the preliminary scouting. Jones must've thought Lonnie was famous, and he was River Grove's direct link to fame for itself.

Damn it, Lonnie thought, if only I hadn't been speeding yesterday. Fame, even the faintest potential of fame, changes everything the moment it seems within reach.

Lonnie no longer had access to the real River Grove, the one that had no pretensions of fame. The one he saw that first afternoon when he was caught speeding around Haddox Square.

So, he did his best to write it (his report) from memory: how he saw it that first day: even though the River Grove he was writing in wasn't the River Grove it had been the day before, the River Grove he was writing about.

He started to wish he'd never stopped there. He wished there was some way he could recover the old River Grove from the grips of the rumor of potential fame, restore it to the way it was before he got there, before anyone from AMTROPETA had ever heard the name River Grove.

He felt responsible for forever altering the personality of River Grove just by showing up there. He'd brought

with him like a disease the pretensions of fame, even though it was all just a big misunderstanding from the get-go. Lonnie wasn't famous then. Lonnie had no ties to the Hollywood community yet, even though he lived and worked in a Los Angeles district not four miles from Culver City.

He was just a copywriter sent into the field to do his job. And he'd made it all very clear to that Jones that he had no intentions (or means for that matter) of doing anything more than writing a short piece of copy for the web about the local attractions. This was just a huge misunderstanding he'd have to clear up after he was finished with his assignment.

But what was done was done, history is history, and history is dead as a doornail: no matter how much you try to bring it back to life, history is always the stiff corpse of a life on the move.

In just under thirty-six hours the first draft was done and he was back in his room at the Lauraline typing it up, getting it ready to send to Reed. He decided against writing about the old River Grove, which by the way isn't the real name of the town where Lonnie first arrived.

He vowed to never write or mention the name of the town for the sake of its own safety and preservation. So he made the name up: River Grove. Forgot the old name, the real name. Never mentioned it again. If he

had, tourists would show up in small towns like River Grove like he had; ruin them like he had.

So he thought he'd sabotage the campaign, do a piece about a small town in the South that's getting its own reality show. Fake the whole thing. Idea of the story being that people would want to come see the region and all its attractions based on the fact that if it was interesting enough to make a TV show about it was interesting enough to visit first-hand. But they'd never be able to find this town because it won't really exist, except in his story. Potential customers will search and search the web for this so-called famous town and they'll never be able to find it except in Lonnie's story, and so they'll pick some other HOTT locale to visit and leave the little small Southern towns alone.

He figured by writing a good enough story he could kill two birds with one stone. First off, he could sabotage the whole campaign of trying to lure travelers to small towns by creating a place they could never find (i.e. the fake town with the TV show) and save all the small towns from becoming like River Grove. And secondly, he could get his assignment done and get back to the office.

Eventually, River Grove and its people would forget about him and return to the way it was before he got there. His plan was perfect he thought. Job gets done, small town America gets spared the intrusion of tourism

and urban sprawl, and even more importantly: fame. In a roundabout way, by sparing the old River Grove he was sparing all small towns in the South and beyond. That means he would be sparing the land of his father from the plague of fame.

In his own way, Lonnie Edwards was preserving a way of life he'd never know. He wasn't sure why it needed to be preserved, he just knew it did. The only way to experience and preserve the truly authentic is to forget about it and let it be what it is.

"Story of my life..."

Some people in history are lucky. If you're lucky they'll say you lived and you died and you were a good person. They'll never write or say a-thing about you more than that. If you're lucky they'll tell the story of your life by bowing their heads and observing a moment of silence. Some people are lucky. And some people— well, some people—

"Story of my life," he was always saying to himself— it always comes or goes in some kind of box."

The spackled cinder block walls of room 117 at the Lauraline Motor Inn are sweating nearly as hard as Lonnie is. The air conditioner has quit completely. The occupants in room 116 are using jackhammers to redecorate, so it sounds like.

Lonnie's body is ready to collapse on him, give plumb out— and his skull is splitting down the center of his dripping forehead. He's been constipated for three days with no signs of movement anytime soon. Etc., etc. I

could go on and on about Lonnie's troubles, we all have our own troubles in life. But that ain't what's important here. Naw, what's important here is that the man couldn't be happier. Seriously. He's happy as a lark.

The heavy air of the Deep South is leaving his salty puddles around the keyboard he's hovering, pecking away at those keys with the hereditary half-grin of his father across his face: the inherited look of self-satisfaction and the confidence of a job well done. It's common to all the Edwards males.

Once the necessary files are attached to the message (around 267KB remaining) and the SEND tab clicked, there will be nothing left to do but smile and sweat. Smile and sweat. In the morning he will check out, stop for a good breakfast, and then hit the long highway home. He'll never be happier to cross over to the other side of the continental divide. Well… almost never… Click

"There you go boss man."

And like a bullet he was released, his body unbound from his mind. He rose and sprinted toward the bathroom door.

With the click it came, and he was almost a half-second too late. As he sat there he pondered if there were for sure any direct physiological links between bowel movements and the completion of a rough draft. Because for reasons beyond him neither one was able to be finished

without the other. But never mind that for now. He is finished with both and happy as a lark.

Swoooosh

Now outstretched across the polyester duvet covering the California King he'd requested (he's a tall man and sleeps like he's lying in a coffin), Lonnie is repeating out loud to his boss (as if the man were actually in the room with him, or he was already back in the office):

"Mr. Bohanan you're gonna love it. You're gonna love it. You're gonna love it. You're gonna love it. You're gonna love it. Trust me when I say, Reed, Mr. Bohanan , you are really gonna love it. I think it's the best I've done yet. You're gonna love it. Just love it."

He falls asleep in mid-mantra. Despite the fact that his mattress is flatter than those in a sleeper sofa and he's sweating harder than a professional wrestler, he sleeps a sleep he hasn't slept since before his dad passed away.

Lonnie was still in college when Big D passed on. It's been all tossing and turning and pitch dark terror in the night since then. But he'd've been proud, Dale Edwards would've. This was Lonnie's first feature done on-location and alone without the editorial assistance of Mr. Bohanan . Hopefully the first (on-location— he's done many smaller jobs from the office) of many to come in a long and fruitful career in the field.

♫ *Reep* ♫ *Ding* ♫ *Reep* ♫ *Ding* ♫ *Reep* ♫ *Ding* ♫

Upon waking, even before silencing that desolate racket of the motel alarm, he found that he had passed out in all his salt-ringed clothing perpendicular across the bed, a big salty circle in the center of that mauve and mallard green duvet. He'd even left every light in the room on. *Damn I ain't slept like that in years.*

He killed the alarm. And with all he'd packed the night before out into the heavy wet air he went whistling Dixie, heading toward the main office to handle his final official business in River Grove before heading back to L.A. Sweat was already pasting his shirt to his back half way across the parking lot, but already he was smiling the day's smile, almost like he hadn't quit even in his sleep. Happy as a lark.

"We sure do appreciate your stay with us Mr. Edwards. You just come on back any time honey. Next time we'll have the air fixed for you. I went ahead and put a discount back on your card for the inconvenience. I hope you slept alright last night," the desk clerk said as Lonnie handed her his key cards and collected his receipt.

"Oh everything was just fine," he said, trying to be polite.

"Ma'am, where's a good place near the highway to have breakfast? I need something quick but hearty. And I don't want any of this fast food gut-bomb stuff either. I

have a long drive ahead of me and I don't plan on stopping until I get home."

"Honey, you just stop in over at Thelma's Lunch Box there just off Cardinal Street. Sit at the counter there and you'll get in and out before you know it. Tell them We sent you. Just take a left out of our parking lot and go until you see the farmers' co-op on your right. Thelma's will be the next building on your left. The highway ain't but a mile or so on up past Thelma's."

"Sounds perfect. Oh, and ma'am may I use your computer real quick to check my email? Mine's packed and I need to make sure my assignment was delivered okay. I'd hate to get on the road without knowing for sure. I'd worry the entire way back. And I got over two thousand miles to drive. That's a lot of worry. Just want to make sure my boss got it. He's gonna love it. I've outdone myself. The atmosphere here just… I don't know. It gave me an energy I don't get when I'm cooped up in the office. Heck I could probably write a whole book about this place."

"Well good for you honey. It's just wonderful to see young folks like you succeeding in this economy. Glad you liked our little corner of the planet. You ought to write a book about us. Be a bestseller I guarantee you. You go right ahead and use whatever you need."

Begin the Apologies

INBOX (1):

From:

The Offices of Reed C. Bohanan
308 B Floor 3 RedCap Tower 2
Los Angeles, California
rcb@thebuckman.com

June 2nd

Lonnie Edwards, If you're seriously thinking of publishing this failure go ahead and start writing apology letters to all parties involved (i.e. mentioned directly or indirectly anywhere). Else we, and by WE I mean ME, will without a doubt be sued to the freakin wall for all this slanderous and libelous material. This is crap, Edwards. Worst I've seen from you or anyone else in this office in many years. I suggest you find another story

before you get back, and burn every last note of this poorly rendered excuse for a travel advertisement backstory.

We're selling a whole place and time in history. We aren't selling just a service, Edwards. I thought you knew that by now. But judging by this you want to pander pure disastrous spectacle to our clients. This sounds like you're trying to get FEMA to visit a disaster zone and lend federal aid to help this poor place and its residents. These are real people, not caricatures.

Get rid of it all!

As a matter of fact delete this email account immediately after you read this message so we'll have every square inch of our asses covered, legally speaking. I don't want our names attached to anything close to this. Earn that promotion son! This is the single most incoherent assignment I've ever encountered in all my years of Internet copywriting. You aren't drinking are you? You better not be. But I'm done beating the dead mule. I got work here in the office to do. Obviously the servers are back up. Don't make me regret my decision to send you into the field. Your deadline still stands. Tuesday morning Edwards. Tuesday morning.

RCB

Lonnie didn't flinch. He should have known. Bye-bye happy birdie. He just smiled at the lady at the counter, grabbed his bag and headed for the door. In his rented sedan he looked at himself in the rearview and began talking to his reflection:

"Like I've always said. Story of your life. It always comes in some kind of box. I know. Email inbox can now be added to your list of boxes," he addressed himself like he was talking to another Lonnie, a person he is but isn't. His doppelganger perhaps.

"The catalyst that takes me back to square one, or propels me two blocks forward and one to the side, check. Not realizing I've just exposed my king, checkmate. It hasn't all been bad news, but you can't remember the last time it was good. Can you? Nope.

What the hell are you going to write about now?

Oh, and by the way, is it really such a good idea to be going to eat at a place named Thelma's Lunch Box? It's just superstition, the box theory. Is that so? Yeah, actually that's what I'm going to start calling it: the Lonnie Edwards Box Theory of His Life. That doesn't answer my question. What now? Who knows. Story of my life…"

5

Vignettes from River Grove

[SB 09-80/4-6]

HL.SA.09141.Φ

Thelma's Lunch Box Diner, I

" indulge on the mysticism of media personalities, digital crafts like hacking and online romance and eFarming, or lamenting over long-hanging town announcements he often chose not to read aloud in front of everyone, though he wanted hard for it; he was a free boy aware of his impulses)— and enquire on the contents of the notice— it probably said something like:

Hot-rods, Floats, Old Time Music 3rd Sat. of the Month at the Old Timers Day Parade— he hadn't yet, at that time, run any errands on that side of Cardinal St.

BACK across the American South I was headed home— recounting the tales of the times, the history of the folks, and the legends of the land. Deeper mysteries I'd only recently heard."

I couldn't tell you if it was all true, part true, exactly half true, had been true, never true, or what kind of true it could have been— if that were in fact true of his intentions or theirs. I believed it. I believe it, I and will— but I couldn't swear then or now if the whole tale was fraud as a three-dollar bill or not. I couldn't say at that time for sure if it was the Good Word for certain. But I did believe it. Still do. That's the truth.

I was just passing through. Happened to stop for some home fries, three over-easy Dixie eggs, two patties of hot smoked sausage, black coffee, and the three amphetamine-D quick memory tablets I left in my overnight bag. Had to stay sharp till I reached the continental divide. Then it was back to the high rise from which I came. That was the plan.

I'm not usually out doing business this way. Usually write at my home office, where business gets done. Rarely on the road. But this required a face-to-face decision (had to see it in person), a rarity in this market. I needed every edge I could manage.

On the road, plans can change. I'd already done one

draft: rejected. Not a problem. I was ready to find another. My breakfast was finished. My notes were on the masonite bar surface in front of me. Surely, I could rework the material to suffice Reed's needs.

On mild attention meds I could manage the tale more efficiently, kill some time before I go, glance at the notes and find another angle. Have coffee and cigarettes or maybe an apple fritter before I hit the road. Who knows? I can rework the tale. No need to find another. Surely, I could.

I was taking it all in. The ambiance of the little diner in the little township which— judging by the fact that neither my GPS nor my mapping software can locate it— time has forgotten. I was taking it in when an older gentleman— about my grandfather's age— shuffled in the diner door and sat to my immediate left. Good ol boy. Pocket Tee-Shirt. Jeans. Work Boots. He was from around here. Family the salt of the land, his belt ought to have read.

You could tell by the twiddle in his thumbs, and the slip of his tongue across chapped, snuff stained lips, though it was deep into the sweltering time of the year that he had a thing or two on his mind. He had a thing to say. Anyone could see that. He was from around here no doubt about it.

"Good day young man. Fine weather we're havin. How ya doin?"

"Yes sir. Fine I am. It certainly is a beautiful day."

My other half, the business half, would like to tell you there was nothing more said between us. Plan went as planned: I mentioned how the South was everything they said it was; he disagreed, favoring another South, another home. I wrote mine anyway. Not what they show on TV, he says. I offered to buy the gentleman a tube of lip balm, odd as it would have seemed at the time. Wasn't sure how to proceed— him calm as a cucumber. Me awkward in my place at the bar.

He obliged.

I'd like to tell you that I paid for cherry balm & eggs, Dixie sausage & black coffee, tipped the lady behind the counter, and left the diner. I'd like to tell you that I was *Not* stopped by the gentleman inviting me back to see his South. The end. I closed the deal, wrote the new copy, collected my revenue, and was home in time for a quick browse about the Web, my stocks, and a quick laughable video or two. Lights out. I saw the South in late night reruns on Country Videos of America™. I can write it just the same, scrap my honest attempt to capture the humid reality of River Grove. That's the version of the story I'd like to tell you. The one where I am a brutally honest businessman that lets his wallet talk in times like these, inattentive to the atmosphere.

I'd like to tell you I said, "no sir, I have a business meeting to attend. And please, the balm is on me," when

he asked me if I'd like to know about how the Federal Government recently reduced his and their monthly aid checks by nearly sixty percent— by enough to make a person starve to death— enough to interrupt the smooth flow of retirement into the lax life after hard labor.

I'd like to tell you that.

But the truth is the man had a solid point. I figured, for whatever reason, I ought to listen. I had recently read on the Web somewhere that there'd been federal cut-backs and more were coming. Truth is I write corporate copy. I understand cut-backs and cost-reduction. And truthfully, I already closed the deal. I had a new tale already on my mind. I just needed to get it out onto the page in less than a day or two and Reed would be happy. I've never known him to stick unwaveringly to a deadline before. The office head understands the nature of the market.

What I'd like to tell you doesn't matter because what I said was, "Sure. By all means, let's hear it."

He went on and on. All the details. Back and forth. This happened because of this, that because of that. Skip forward to the end; pull back to the middle, or three quarters through, maybe just a quarter. He did all the voices of all the parties involved like folks tend to do when they feel moved to justify themselves to the peculiar and unavoidably leeching way things in this life had become. He gave

the whole authentic dramatization of actual past and scheduled events— events they (he and his) may or may not have been part of but knew well anyway, events ongoing and still in planning.

I started thinking back on this time my grandfather told me a story he heard about similar folks in similar situations, in similar times. The Great Depression, they called it. Said it's always goin to be that way. Said hard times are hard times. For everyone, he said. Yes. Granddaddy told it in a real similar way: a recreation of all the lives funneled up through one man's story to his offspring. And the same on to theirs. Granddaddy Dale was raised down here.

The man went on.

"More coffee, please ma'am. Son, listen. When these folks start losing their monthly aid, bad things start happening to them. It ain't nothing new. Them checks keep the bad spirits away. You've heard that before haven't you? Bad mojo. Solid truth, son. Solid truth. Bad things. You wouldn't believe what happened to a good friend of ours just last month. His aid check quit coming all together. And—"

The man teared up a bit and choked back the break in his voice. He lookded around at all the diner patrons and saw that everyone was listening. I looked around, too. Seems everyone knew exactly who this fellow is talking

about.

"Man Alive!" he continued after gaining his composure. "Boy, you wouldn't believe it if I tell it on the Good Book. I'll put my hand on that Good Book to tell you and everyone on this round Earth that'll listen just exactly what happen to Merel Gene McAlister."

Merel Gene, I thought, *What a great name.*

The more I listened and the more I thought about it, and the more coffee I had as my meds kicked in, and the more the man talked about it with me and the others, the harder it was for me to quit thinking about who exactly Merel Gene McAlister was. And what happened to him exactly. *Merel Gene McAlister… Merel Gene.*

I started thinking about what that generation and those to come might have to do to get by. How they might not live long enough to starve to death, and in doing so get lucky. What could a cold winter mean to the old and hungry— and perhaps the lost? Those lost of mind, home, and aid. I kept thinking about the hungry and the lost of mind, and home. How could I not?

This man sat there with tears in his eyes telling a stranger, me, how his good friend Merel Gene had just lost his monthly aid check, and how he had been the first in River Grove they'd heard about, and in being so he had suffered not just some private, personal tragedy. But he had suffered for all of em—

[*What do the elders in the tribe do when the time comes? What else is there to do but to walk into the big Pine thicket alone? It's just like that really. This man losing his aid check. The first to walk into the wilderness and never come back. But is this an isolated incident? Or is a generation of elderly citizens about to lose their monthly aid checks, too?*]

—I believed him when he said *solid truths* and *bad spirits*. I believed him. Why not? I just nodded to let him know I was still listening, let him know I'd like a turn to speak my peace when the time comes and I'm sure of the details. Time to ask questions. I remember him start to tell it clear as day. I remember it clear as it's happening today.

Then the man to my left called his buddies over to witness the oath he was about to take. The oath to vouch for him and his— to assure me he was telling the solid, dirt-honest truth of the times. And then they'd all tell it differently at the same time, the waitress said. They'd tell it to whoever was willing to listen, or stuck waiting on Thelma's Dixie Eggs. And they'd always take the oath and talk over one another.

Between what the first man said, the second added his own detail; the third confirmed or refuted a variation of the two. In rough order, it went on like this. A forth unnamed diner guest, an older gentleman, older than the others, sat at the elbowed bend of the bar a piece down from the group.

He winked, nodded, kicked back his cup, occasionally shook his head in disagreement, and once out-right verbally objected to a guaranteed fact misrepresented and imposed into the tale by the second gentleman right of him at the counter. I don't recall his name. But he was no authority on that subject, I suppose, since the Old Man called himout. So, he cleaved him out of conversation momentarily.

There was an unspoken agreement between them, an agreement that not one of them had part in authoring: whatever was said out-loud was subject to his (the oldest gentleman's) telescopic scrutiny of matters of solid fact. And if he wasn't there, the duty gets charged to the next oldest, and so on down the bar, or wherever the occasion finds them. There was an unspoken agreement that the oldest gentleman had no part in authoring this oath. Much older an assignment of role they've fallen under. They tell it, they say, like it is. They keep telling it and retelling it because it is.

William Ray, Ernie, Tom Cat, Otis Zane (as the first man's name turned out to be. He didn't talk much after that though). They keep at it: the remembering and the telling and the re-remembering and the re-telling.

You've heard folks say, "they say" in a story to escape the burden of proof. These fellows are *they*. Trustees of the source: Merel Gene McAlister's legacy-makers, wrong-

righters. Perpetual eulogizers.

I admit that I was (still am) caught up in the Southern intrigue of it all. It was gothic to me. Romance. The Dead Man in The Street During The Parade. The Rumors of Government Aid Conspiracy. The Small Town Off the Beaten Path. All of it.

"Are you listening to us, sir? We do solemnly swear— that somebody told us they heard it happened exactly like they'd been saying it happened all along— there— Wait! Wait! Good folks *We* didn't include our names in the oath. *I reckon we ought to do it again— you know, just in case— in case that makes it not official*— unbinding, in some folks' eyes, if we don't. Just in case. Know what I mean, son?— […] —Alright. Here We go— In the presence of you good folks here assembled at our favorite country diner, and since we occupy the winner's circle at more than half of all The Lying Contests ever held at the Old Timers Day Parade in Downtown River Grove, We do solemnly swear to it that—"

"HEY, HEY, HEY! Hold on," Thelma interrupted. "William Ray, Ernie, Tom Cat, Otis Zane— ya'll stop harassing the customer. Honey, are these gentleman bothering you? Ya'll leave this boy alone. Done said he has to drive plumb back to California. Ya'll done took another hostage. You need anything else? Your check? A fritter? Something to take with you?—"

A Father After Wars

Merel Gene McAlister spoke (speaks) to his children about Childhood, War and Grief:

On each occasion I'd let myself pull away from the life I'd grown accustomed to in the solitude of my mountain home and visit the fading man called Father, I'd grow sicker of the life wasted at war— sick to see that waste take on flesh in an over-stuffed VA hospital nearly thirty-five years past the Conflict. The cleavings that were left of
Father's mind after he learned the agent was hidden in his gut had become transfixed on a
violent past— his body now reminiscing the heartaches of war.

He shot a child he remembered, a boy fighting his daddy's war.

Every time I grew sicker to my stomach from hearing his violent memory echo in the sick gut of my mind. He just kept at it, "It was us or him. It was us or him. I had to.

He'd of killed us all and himself for his daddy."

Still, there remained a softness behind that stone face he kept, a glint of his innocent heart. Still there is hope for my generation's sons and daughters. And since he is many years dead now, I don't mind telling you of Father's wars:

"These hollows don't lie; they echo as they see fit to funnel a voice over the
land." His voice would boom and circulate about the mountain. At dusk he'd bellow across the pasture down from the back porch toward the pine thicket where we played our young lives out as heroic bandits on the run. He would call us home to eat in silence. He'd call us; we could hear him in the crannies of the woods where the supper bell couldn't reach. His voice would boom as though he were right behind us always hidden, always right on our tail. He said you can tell a boy's been to battle by his voice alone, even in the most remote crevices of the dark woods. A soldier's voice becomes booming in battle like the cannons at Shiloh in the spring of 1862. Boom. Boom. Boom.

I knew I'd never go on my free will after I heard the boom that war makes in a voice.

It boomed and we would quiver over, not knowing at first what the boom would mean once we got back for supper. Quiver over like we were takin fire. Sometimes he

would react like compressed gun powder mixing with oxygen and flame in the hot case of a rifle round, then recoil like he was the rifle sending that hot round down range. Sometimes he wouldn't flinch; minuscule things would fester until he would erupt on those closes to him. Miniscule dilemmas: Bottle top stuck to shoe sole; Slipped wrench caught between the motor block and frame; Out of cool water after a long pick-up shoe game with a few friends. Tiny things to most. Tiny things that are quick to mend.

But these tiny dilemmas caused us more than just a few uncomfortable whelps in those days. Whole, improvised building-block cities and legions of posed toy soldiers (gifts from past birthdays and Christmases) fell victim to the booming voice of Father, and the fits that followed. We were those toys he burned in the back yard. And Father empathized with them. The burning plastic men and the ruined city. It's for the best, he'd say.

Not that we had a whole lot time to play anyways, with the farm to keep up and Father only being able to work half the time on account of his depression and his fits. The assaults fell on our minds like white phosphorus thick and wooly on the skin of his enemies.

"I Will Be Damn! That's cute. Real cute. 'Bout to bust a side of a head on my hands. Burn that hide up with the family belt if ya'll don't come when I call again.

Supper's ready. And your momma has worked hard at it."

I remember his pursuit was most wild and direct when I brought C's home from school. It went liked this the first time:

Father learned of them, and I knew it when he entered the room.

Father stopped. And I stopped.

He moved the left boot. I to the left.

Backed toward the end of the old sofa.

He closed in.

Stubbed and stumbled off his left boot over a pillow. Backed a bit. Dust stirred in a flame of harsh light around him.

I clutched a throw.

He got hotter at his own missteps, and mad at himself for what he couldn't stop from doing.

I winced and shuffled back.

He collected his feet.

I stopped. Still clutching pillow. Still in the heat of his furious and guilt-addled mind, he whipped down with a patent leather belt with the family name, McAlister, onto his own thigh to keep from hitting us so hard.

I backed, hit the corner, stuck, and winced for mercy.

He closed in.

Merciless.

It was usually over quickly.

And the dust would settle.

Father never whipped me with the family belt to blood— just enough to get my attention. Afterward, I learned I'd better learn to ace history, and spelling, and math, and earth science real quick— or Father would be disappointed. Whelps in the skin rarely sting for more than a minute or two, a tiny fraction of the time it takes for the mind to recover from Father's disappointment in it.

Now, I wish he'd've whipped me every time.

*

I would go to the Veteran's Hospital alone in my mid-twenties. I would watch him rest there in his life-supporting bed, and think of the times he made me learn. He was Daddy-o when he was happy with our learning, Father when he was disappointed in us.

He was Father all the time.

What comes in exchange of Dad's love for the ongoing fear of The Father? The square root of nine? The capital of Mexico? A grudge against the short-comings of our heritage?

I'd grown sick of the war that wasted the life.

I'd grown sick of the wasted life at war.

I'd grown sick of wars and wasted lives.

I'd grown sick of the waste of war, and recoiled from life.

On those weekends when I would come back from the mountain to wash his hair thinning from war, I'd see boys and girls my own age that'd been deployed like Father. And their parents doing the same.

Twenty some odd years later I'd see my own boy off to war.

*

Then Momma said 'your Daddy's comin home,' and I heard he was going to be alright. "The pancreas flair was just a scare." And I thought how? Knew better, but felt I'd heard differently.

That's what happens from war. We misunderstand one another. What Momma really said was, "there's nothing more they can do; more than likely he'll pass within the month. Merel we gonna take your daddy tonight."

So we took him home; he'd rather die on the Mountain. What those junior resident doctors at the VA knew about nurturing a body back to health we could only speculate, and stand by. I had no way of opening Daddy up to rid him of the secret agent that hid in his body. They said back then that they thought those rainbow defoliant compounds were harmless, but stranger things than chemical miscalculations have happened in times of war.

But what could we do?

We could only watch the grown, honest man rot from

the inside out. We could only watch him stare out the passenger side window as we were taking him back to the place where he was born, the place he raised us kids.

The next few proved to be Daddy's Last Days on Big Brotherton Mountain. He was Daddy then.

After decades of fighting it in his mind, the war is all his body had become.

"Sometimes it's necessary."

"What?"

"The War, son. War."

"Why?"

"The tyrants run loose, son— and they get fat off the helpless, the beat down, the hungry, and the lost. And they prey on them, son, 'cause they got no pity or love— and have never suffered, 'cause folks who've suffered have pity and love and look to ease the sufferings people cause one another. And they give love, and never take love away. Folks got to be freed in this life, son. Freed from what they're bound to do to one another."

"They can't help themselves?"

"Sometimes they can't help themselves."

"I'm sick of the war that has wasted your life, Daddy."

"Son, that war's been over for three and a half decades. I ain't thought about it for years. The only wars anybody ought to worry their whole lives over are the wars they've left their kids to fight— those tragic heirlooms they'll in-

herit from blood. ”

“…”

I just stood in the fading light of late spring, as Daddy strolled up the old lane and into the dark.

“I’m goin up there, son, to the barn loft before it gets too dark to see out across the fields, to check on the herd. Have your momma ring that bell when it’s time… go on home Merel and see if she needs any help… understand me son. I’m fine, son. Fine.”

When he was late for Momma’s bell, I knew Daddy had gone up to the barn to die. Truthfully, when I saw his bed turn and fade into the dark of the VA recovery room after his first round of surgeries months before that night, I couldn’t bring myself to see him as Daddy or Father either one. He looked like everybody else there. They all had that look. I didn’t recognize him as only mine.

I imagine all of em as young boys shooting young boys (who didn’t know any better than to listen to their dads the same) with thoughts of their own at home. The women, too. Mothers and daughters the same. I imagine them all livin with it. Fightin a good fight not to let it show. Like him. Burying the War.

LnCpl. Floyd Abe McAlister

WHEN I FOUND HE never made it to the hay loft, but to the big pin oak about half way up the old lane to take his own suffering away, I forgave him for all the hurting he caused us kids (and that boy's family), and started remembering there were an awful lot of good times we had up on Big Brotherton Mountain.

I learned that those weren't his wars he was fighting.

*

That next year, like the years previous and the years to come, the community honored Lance Corporal Floyd Abe McAlister in the Old Timers Parade— like they do all Veterans of Foreign Wars from River Grove.

The Story About the Whooping Crane

YOUR DADDY IS GETTING bad off, Daniel,"

"You ought to go see him," they said at The Maude.

That story about the whooping crane you'd've thought he told every other day for the better part of a half-century by the time he got to that stage. You'd have thought it haunted him to the bone the way he talked about it on and on; and that ain't to say it scared him either. He just couldn't let that thing go, couldn't get it done when he tried to get it out of his mind. For years the same bird he'd say, he swore it was that same bird—

"You can tell so by the way he drops his neck in line with the top part of his wings right before he hits the skim, or lands there in the dip by that stretch of cattails on the east bank, the sickle cove, on that side, on this side, the other side of the pond near'st the mouth of Polk Hollow,"

— That same bird would light, the story goes, like it would every time over the years in different places by the

pond. Beside that nearest pond there, land like it was going to a black-tie supper on the shore of its own private ocean. *Its own little piece of our water.*

There was no secret. All the details of where that bird would land. Not a second after hopping the bitter reeds, the briars and the cattails, —*he'd be plucking up granddaddy's blue gill*, his youngest grandbaby'd say. Out there in plain view of all the farm creatures, the trees, the roosting birds, the wild grass, and their granddaddy's people.

That's not a lie, either, she said. *Nor is it all the details, all of them, of the McAlister homestead up on Big Brotherton Mountain*— the setting of the story about their granddaddy and the whooping crane. Sarah Belle would tell it like she heard it happened to someone else's family other than her own. Pride kept her from it.

The whole family'd always be watching him. They'd watch the *head of the table* forget his name. They'd monitor him from back up beside the feed shed while he was out enjoying in the light air of the mountain. They'd watch him from a distance and narrate his every action like they were the TV host of a Wild America program. They'd do it mostly to forget about what was happening to him. Make comedy of the barre bones reality they faced.

Watch, they'd say, *look at granddaddy but listen to us*: "*It's not a violent existence in the wild. This is the nature of these things. For, everything in an ecosystem has its place on the level. It's the*

same with plant life, only that life has to be time-lapsed to see it when first airing in prime-time, syndicated slots. Here in this South, we can get syndication. So now, let's watch safely, in real-time, as the whooping crane stalks its prey…"

(They'd crack themselves up more than anyone else they'd ever seen over nothing. They were hosting their own backwoods, Sunday morning nature program on backwoods public access TV in their minds. Absurd lengths to keep from crying or letting the space around them go silent. They'd act like he was the brave and knowledgeable host of the show out there in the lenses, out there in reach of the animal kingdom. They would say *it just like that, like his story goes.*

But they knew he was getting sick to his mind. They accommodated to make him comfortable. When the sun was sinking and throwing long-shadows about the hollows in his earth, they'd accommodate to make sure he didn't wander out across the land and forget where he was. Hard to remember home even, when the memory disease starts to show.

There's a dip of a gully there between the house and the pond where the rainwater splits the front pasture. It stands near six foot deep in some places. Hides at dusk. If folks wouldn't be careful they'd fall into it. But he'd lived there his whole life. He could feel it in his younger days. Could have skipped it blind. He'd look out across the dark

bends in his land when the memory disease started to show, though, struggling to illuminate what the shadows had covered.

It was the time he'd come back to the house all muddy and told them he was alright, that he just fell into that little gully there in the pastor. No big deal. It was this time that they knew something was a matter. It ain't like a good farmer to forget even the slightest bend in his piece of land, even in the darkest shadow. Even blind. Those folks that loved him, they had to start figuring out ways to remind him of things— and not question his dignity.

That's when there little pretend nature show became more useful than to just them. They'd pretend they were hosting a nature program to re-inform him of the ways of the land and farmer. They started doing it for everybody at supper, too. They'd do it again to make him grin, to make him laugh, maybe remind him a time or two:

Farmer stocks the pond, feeds the fish.

Fish eat the food the farmer gives them.

A fish gets big.

When a fish gets big the farmer eats it. (sigh of relief)

When the farmer eats it he restocks the pond.

The stock runs thin.

If it ain't thinned by the farmer, the farmer runs thin.

When the farmer runs thin, he starts looking for the source.

When the farmer runs too thin, and his family runs too thin, he finds that source, one way or the other.

That's how he thought about life those days. It's like he thought the pond was running so low that his family was about to starve. And he got stuck on that thought. It lasted years. They called it an unfortunate thing because they didn't know what else to call it. Elderly fixation. Perhaps dementia. He never formally seen a real nerve or brain doctor until it was basically already too late.

And then he started talking about the whooping crane showing up.

He acted like the bird he kept seeing was eating not on account that all creatures got to eat some time or the other, but on account that he, "that damn whooping crane", somehow knew that the farmer was and pond owner was Merel Gene McAlister. And so he was planning eating all the keepers out of that pond out of spite. And for whatever reason this thought occurred to him, he was damn near sawed in two by the audacity of the bird's own lack of remorse. For eating up nearly all those good keepers in the McAlister family pond, he ought to have been ashamed of himself, Merel Gene thought.

Merel Gene thought he and his wouldn't have a single bite left to eat when times got hard and the aid ran out.

"Every last one of them things gobbled up by that whooping crane."

But all whooping cranes surely can know in the wild is that hunger is a creeping thing. That hunger can pare your breath up through bones on the back side of every hard winter. All the bird knew right there in the half-shadows of the earth and the muddy water was to eat his hunger away. Like all starving creatures. Eat like in the coming days that pond would freeze and he'd have to leave thirsty and hungry, dry clean up, or fly off toward the nearest wide river shoal if he ever wanted again for whatever it is that whooping cranes want for when they ain't looking for food.

Merel Gene thought the bird had taken up a malicious, calculated cause against him and his family. That's how the memory disease works in the early years.

[The whooping crane dipped. The pond surface broke, the story says. Merel Gene was looking half-fixed down from the corner orchard when he saw the whooping crane from the corner of one of his eyes, spun one good time about the apple trees, took a quick thumb-test of the wind (none), and started toward the house to get his shotgun.]

One Wednesday in late February, Merel Gene took off toward the nearest pond one afternoon with 'his shotgun' held by his two throbbing hands to his chest across a fading pair of BirdDog™ overalls. And no one knew what

for. Because by then, between the time he first saw the bird that day while he was in the apple orchard and the time he realized what he'd came to the house for, months had passed him by. The harvest was over. That old top layer of red clay around the farmer's lot had been frozen stiff since fall turned to winter's peak. The widow's peak, they called it on Big Brotherton Mountain. The winter before he'd done the same, on the same frozen ground, thinking maybe he'd get that bird one year.

The fields'd done been cut, turned flat. The mountain air visible. The crops had been canned and put up in the cellar. Nobody'd cared to go fishing in any of them ponds anyhow. It's too cold that time of year. Tell the truth, they rarely bite down there anyway, not on the good hot days of summer and not in late fall. In fact, no one has clean'a mess fish beside them waters in Lord knows how long. Years, more than likely. Years.

Merel Gene in all his fading health ain't been to that pond in over a decade. That pond damn near dried up a couple years ago. They sold that side parcel of land back when Sarah Belle got diabetes and they needed the extra money for insulin and needles. Daniel pawned that shotgun years ago, pocket watch too. So, what Merel thought was a shotgun was really an old lever action 30/30 replica his granddaddy got out West in a mining town resort gift

shop years and years ago.

So, they kept telling him, "that's your granddaddy's commemorative rifle, Merel. It ain't a shotgun."

But he called it a shotgun anyway, even though in his better years he would've most certainly known the difference. He was a veteran from the Marine Corps.

It wasn't for the lack of direction in his thoughts that he showed his sickness early on. He kept a single train of thought for whatever duration he saw fit. Too long really. He would obsess over whatever he saw would fit his little resentments. And the one he saw fit to obsess over was the bird disrupting to his grandkids would survival after he was gone. He thought if he left the business of the bird unfinished his kids and grandkids would most certainly not survive. It's these irrational obsessions where the disease first showed itself.

If you'd have asked Merel Gene what was troubling him as he was cutting eye holes in the window over the kitchen sink, he'd have told you. He stared out across that field from that window over that sink everyday that last winter on the mountain. Until he went to The Olive Branch he'd stared out toward a whooping crane eating up all his bluegill. He'd have said that bountiful pond had been passed down through his family for generations. He'd have mentioned in a flat, affectless voice that it was their last source of food and water.

It didn't matter what you asked him, really. You could've asked him what he had from breakfast and he'd have said, "that whooping crane's-a eatin up all the keepers I was savin for that next grandbaby of mine. My old bones tell me its goin to be a little, freckle-faced gal like your momma. I've been seein' it way too many years now, comin' and goin, pickin our stock over like it has. What you think she goin do? She ain't even goin to know. That young'un won't even know what a fish looks like if I don't do something about that bird. If I don't do something about that bird he'll pick our family pond clean, pick our stock plumb over like he's been a-doin for years and years. I remember daddy sayin something about it when I was a kid. Daddy knew too. Damn that bird done made fools of us, out here on our own land. I wanted all ya'll to see all this; your kids too, what that bird's been a doin to us all these years. This all won't be here long, I can promise you that. We'll have to sell before you know it. That pond won't hold a hog-sucker by time he's finished with it. That damn bird; ya'll see that damn bird out there eatin up all the bluegill? Ya'll see that? I say— Sarah Belle get my shotgun— why yes I am. I see it…? See it, there?"

They never once answered him directly when he asked. They just beat around the bush when he asked about that bird. Truth be told, nobody ever said a word because nobody, not a single person, had ever seen that bird. Not

once. He was the only one. That's not to say there wasn't a whooping crane on Big Brotherton Mountain at some point over the years and years and years his kin had been there. And that ain't to call Merel Gene a liar. I'm sure he seen it or something that he thought was a whooping crane. But it wasn't there when he said it was there. No one told him though. And no one told him they'd sold the land and the pond either. No one could bear to tell him. You can't tell anyone with late stage dementia anything but, "I love you. I miss you."

In times like these, they hire a licensed, detached third party to answer these questions.

"Looks more like a stork to me, Mr. McAlister. Maybe we ought to put you in an optometry checkup order and get them old eyes of yours checked out. Look here. Right here. How many fingers am I holding up?"

"… there once was a bird. See it?"

"There sure was. I did see it. It had a little sack in its beak and everything. Probably delivering a newborn down the hall. Mr. McAlister, your wife sure does love you. She wanted me to tell you that. There you go… you want me to pull up the Don Sidwell Comedy Hour so you can watch it while the medication kicks in? I think them grandbabies of yours are coming to see you before they go to the parade this afternoon. I remember them saying

something about it Thursday. You goin to watch the parade out the window ain't ya Mr. McAlister? Won't you be so happy to see them Mr. McAlister— Mr. McAlister…? I'll wake you when your grandbabies get here. Shut your eyes. "

That's what they say. What else can they say?

"Is my Daniel coming?"

"He'll probably be at the parade, Mr. McAlister. Everybody goes to the parade. But he likely won't come down here. He never has."

"And the bird?"

"The bird is gone, Mr. McAlister."

"Good news. That's good news."

Mail Call at
The Olive Branch

"Shut up Ernie. No they didn't. I never missed that parade, and never will!"

"Don't worry; they act like this every time somebody brings up what happen to Merel Gene that day at the parade. Act like he come back up from dead and spiked the coffee."

[He waited until Tom Cat and Ernie settled, then started in on the 110th Annual Old Timers Day Parade, after a snuff spit and deep coffee breath]

…in May, on Old Timers Day, Merel Gene McAlister had been living in the Olive Branch Assisted Living Facility for just over five years, when they— them kids and grandkids of his with supermarket feet and purple sugar tongues, brats he'd call them, *'sugar happy, little mud-whipples,'*— brought his backed-up, imperative mail (along with the junk) from his homestead up on Big Brotherton Mountain. Gave him afterthoughts of walking to his own mailbox, alone. His box sat atop a wrought-iron wagon

wheel his daddy passed down from his.

"Your granddaddy got it at Mule Day," his daddy would say. Afterthoughts mostly of times past.

"How long it been since ya'll seen Daniel?" (there wasn't a peep in the room; they couldn't remember. Merel Gene could, sometimes, just preferred not to say how long it had been). That's all Merel Gene wanted to know, where his oldest boy was, and if he was alright in his heart.

He got half-way through that stack of pre-pledged credit lines, loan approvals, and rent-to-own propaganda, when he seen that envelope.

[It had been a few weeks or more since they got around to bringing his mail down. He never had it forwarded via U.S. Post Office #8956445 River Grove to his box at the Olive Branch because he knew at first that he was going home to die like his daddy, if he had it his way.]

Legally marked as it was, the top-right corner was stamped red with federal pre-paid postage exclusions, a government guarantee that they'd seen and officially handled said piece of mail. A guarantee The Man knew its contents. The gives and take aways. That's why they say the federal government killed Merel Gene.

Merel Gene knew it when he seen it. The one it ought to have been never looked so slender coming out of the dark cool of the wagon wheel box his granddaddy got at Mule Day. It wasn't like the ones they'd been bringing him.

He knew what it was when he seen it. His life memory came rushing back to him all at once. He just smiled at them kids and thought about his oldest son for a moment.

'Love ya'll,' he thought— *'the aid is leaving. So am I.'*

On May 17th at around 1:45 pm, Merel Gene McAlister got up from his bed at The Olive Branch, put on his best pair of BirdDog™ bib overalls, and walked out the front door of the building. Approximately 4 minutes later, by most accounts, he walked right out in the middle of the flashing intersection crossing between Broad and Short Mountain Road. The Colonel's Car Club section of the parade was passing through the intersection at that time. At 1:50 pm, Merel Gene was struck by a hot rod coupe deville being driven by Morton Taylor. A nearby team of emergency responders began working the incident until the ambulance arrived approximately 3 minutes later. Merel Gene was transported to the Meadow Lark Regional Hospital ER, where he was pronounced dead upon arrival. They couldn't believe it, there on the front page of The Herald.

He was out by then of his backless issued gown, and into his BirdDog™ overalls. There he was right in front of the Olive Branch, right where the parade (an event he never missed, not once since Daniel left) was running that year like the year before, and all the years before

that. And when he got to where he wanted to be in the parade, for God only knows why, Merel Gene released that body-of-his from its wilting stance and let it fall, a haggard bird of prey toward pavement like he confused it for water reflecting his own face back at him, like he was being saved in the muddy shoals of a wide slow-moving river, like he had visions of Daniel.

It was a ceremony first; he first got it in the chilly waters of the mighty Piney River, and later near the broke, split-gravel banks of Ole Garner's Creek near the Pinewood Store. Only place around they thought fitting for a baptism. Merel's favorite shoal. It was only his Momma, his Daddy, and Brother Little Sammie Lee Brown that seen him then. But on this Memorial May occasion, everybody— they mean Everybody was watching the parade.

It might be that every single person in town ought to have seen what Merel Gene did that day. It might be rock hard to talk openly about an event as explicit, and near unwatchable, as the one Merel Gene set in motion that hot day in May. Might be so hard, silence comes natural.

How can you describe the things that happen between a Coupe de Ville and body meeting in the middle of Main St? Can't. Because nobody, not a single soul, said a word. Not until he was gone too far headlong into the memorial flow of the parade, hit, pouring down the middle of Main St., a dark stain on the event that everybody seen immedi-

ately after. And even then, nobody really heard what was being said, if anything but chatter, just after the "facts" came out about the severity of the whole scene.

"Anybody see what happen?"

Commotion and noise filled the event. Nobody said a word.

They said that nobody seen anything to speak of.

The old folks didn't blame him though, when they finally heard that he had walked out there on purpose maybe because the aid quit coming. They'd never say a word out loud, but they'd often wished they'd been blessed with Merel Gene's sense of hometown pride and dignity. Not a word.

It wasn't Mort Taylor's fault, though; he was within the official guidelines set forth by the parade council—just like he'd been doing for years.

He (Merel Gene) didn't do it on purpose though, others say. Mr. Taylor always gets it over thirty five in them short drags for the unfortunate kids sitting out in front of Lodge's Jewelers, during every parade since they was old enough to walk to town on their own. (Kitty Lodgeman didn't mind it a few times a year; it was the only place the unfortunate kids were aloud to hang out in town during any community parade). He liked to put on a show.

And no one could blame Mort Taylor for puttin on a

show; Merel Gene was bound and determined to be baptized, the lady from the paper said off the record, under that antique Chevrolet since the moment he seen it coming down the middle of Main Street, crossing the flashing intersection between Broad and Short Mountain, 'cross from the Haddox Community Bank, near the Frosty Jug.

And, believe it or not, of all the hot-rods in the procession, the one that did Merel Gene in— that hot car, belong to an ex-old friend of his. He and Mort graduated high school together, and had been friends when they were younger, but since had a falling out; it was just a coincidence though. They hadn't spoken in years. Both of them had grandkids dancing in the high school color guard. Neither knew what the other was doing that moment on Main St:

Mort was putting on a show for the kids. Merel Gene was doing his damnedest at trying to get somewhere quick, the paper said. Paper said he stole the show. Papers say lots of things when the folks in charge don't care much for the subject of the story on account of his habits.

(Look at that old man, the boy on the corner thought, looking into the iridescent screens in the window vignettes, catching reflections of the parade. Flickers between refractions of a man dying in the street.)

'What's this fool doin?' someone thought.

'Lord, Have Mercy!' Another thought.

"Lock 'em up Mort, Lock 'em up!" another almost said.

(Nobody'd admit they seen it though.)

…Mort whispered, he thought, "Merel Gene get the Hell out of the Road," maybe only half-thought and half-whispered. He thought partially, brief but in-depth at the very moment he and Merel Gene quit being friends nearly a half-century before, strange as it seems, the time he borrowed without asking Abe McAlister's (Merel's daddy) hand-me-down waders for a fishing trip when they were just kids, and how he lightly spanked him for not asking first, not for pain— but to teach a lesson. And how, after that, he hated Mr. McAlister for what he'd done to his pride. And he hated Merel for letting his daddy whip him like that. Then Mort had a flash thought about when he heard through the grapevine that Merel's daddy hung hisself in that big oak out behind his momma's house on Brotherton Mountain. Heard he hadn't died of natural causes like the paper said he had, 'cause the editor at the time was an old war buddy of Abe's who never would have thought in a million years about printing the truth and soiling Abe McAlister's good name for good. And he thought about what they'd say now about Merel Gene dying on the front pages of the news.

Funny (not laughable funny, but odd funny) he

thought, shortly after the manual caliper brakes brought his hot-rod to a stop just on the other side of Merel Gene's trickling body. Funny how the past comes back in times like these. Funny how the past still lives on in us.

But there wasn't a thing funny about it; there's nothing Mort could've ever done. Simple as that. But that didn't stop his thoughts, them knife hard thoughts, from coming on quick as Spring after the full crow moon. Before the marigolds' blooms had gone, after a spring burial, quick as that; quick as that, spring was over. The aid was running out too soon; some folks had to switch halls at The Olive Branch, and Mort Taylor had just killed Merel Gene McAlister on Main St in the Old Timers Day Parade.

(Everybody in River Grove must have seen it, except those unfortunate few citizens of River Grove who quit going to parades years before.)

Daniel is that you…

Hard Working Men & Women

FLEEING LIKE SMOKE UP the jesting solitude of a long-cleared winter flumb went the nest eggs of good hard-working men and women, some with forty plus years of hard-earned spinal compressions. As it happened, their estates— as everyone's assets are called regardless of where they're buried in this little part of the world— were littered by Middle Management and Secretary Mistress across stretches of tropical sand. And it was Samuel Mailman who said he'd seen it coming, knew they'd tarp the fallout rubble from the big federal credit scandal, and folks would suffer. Sam worked for The Man.

The rectangle, recognizable statements were delivered right as rain on aid day for their whole elderly lives. That hot and heating day after the cooler days (before the security checks came small as they'd ever been or had come as far as they could remember to the old folks shopping the windows in their daily allotment of envelopes– that day) was at the time the hottest day of the year, and a genera-

tion of parents' parents was out looking for the mail.

But the letters that came the very last time, this particular time in question, had never before came to the hunched and medicated retail-industrial retirees, the long-time lovers, the simple folk, to the once-calloused-now-softened grandmother and grandfather hands. Unfamiliar with the shapes of the letter's envelopes, an instant soft-spoken mania wafted through the elderly community, permeating the fading cores of their spirits wandering about in the halls of nursing homes. Many of those folks found it hard to stand and let their bodies fall— in some cases fold into themselves seven-fold and bulge in unnatural places even for the elderly body to bulge. Some less affected, though. Death coming soon, they calmly knew. For the rest, at the very least, their palms had become balmy and clammed-up and crooked on the thinnest legal envelopes to ever arrive at their flagged and numbered boxes.

According to what they said at Sunday dinner, the letters said what everybody had been saying the letters were going to say for years, "The aid done run out." But not run out like a good old dog runs out— with enough dignity to die alone, away from his owner, separate from mankind and fellow beast, in the most private corner of a gangly pine thicket, not peculiar on the town's edge; — this town is a town filled with private corners where all good

old dogs can die alone— and strays can run out, never into the confines of back alleys and town squares.

No, not like a good old dog at all. The aid died right up there on the front porch, where God and everybody walks. On the elderly in this town pick-pocketed, hung-out to dry up like bone-dry leather, the aid ran out. And the young folks would put an attitude on them like they'd done something wrong, "can we help you ma'am, or what…?"

"I'm fine but the aid's done run dry. Some not completely all at once though, never more than a half-nickel paid out at a time. Some never even seen a dime after that letter came though, though they said it would, I believe… Some not fine no matter which way it was goin to be cut, where the funds would go. Then and now, and how is this goin to be seen in the eyes of my friends in town?"

They say these things in long, slow lines to the young clerks at the government offices sealing those legal envelopes and ask, "will she lose her aid too? I didn't think the young folks would. Huh?... See we are goin to plumb starve to death come winter."

And they reply, "Ma'am I'm on grant money. Never paid in; and won't ever pay back. Is there anything we can help you with?"

And they wonder why all the time they wander past the pink plastic hydrangeas in the Alzheimer's Hall with a half-

mention in their mouths about The Man who done them wrong. Far as the old folks are concerned, the clerks at the government check offices are all The Man— every single one of them, male or female, any religious affiliation, any sexual preference, any handicap, any skin tone, any background, any way they cut it.

Along with their estates went the vital barriers containing their minds, the gates that manage the pastures between conversations and thoughts, thoughts and internal movements, thoughts of breakfast from supper and back, thoughts and bodily functions, thoughts and the spiritual absence of thought. So what they were really thinking about when they stood muttering and shuffling past their federally protected tin drop boxes almost too far to reach in their aging bodies without mechanical assistance, in the first few months after the aid run out— before they understood there'd been no mistake on the part of Samuel Mailman, assumptions they'd nearly always fail to see truth in since he was there right as rain every day but Sunday delivering as if things'd not gone sideways on them— (what they were really looking for and thinking about) was envelopes filled with the vouchers for a sustainable life and the promise of another Sunday dinner. Without aid they'd have to find a means to eat on their own. Then Sunday'd be just like the rest.

In such a truth encased could they remember, in such a

life as they'd had, having to fetch water from the well and string the green beans on the creaking front porch swing. Similar times when now-broke-down bodies were new with the functions of life. In such a truth exposed, as true as those memories were, they had lost the ability to even gather a glass of cool water from the fountains down the hall.

But they rarely cook anything more than quick box meals around here anymore anyhow— and have few reasons, save old unshakable habits, to check their boxes. All but impossible it becomes for them in times like these to make small talk with their neighbors— neighbors with their exact shuffling in their sections of the hall, the sidewalk (they call it)— or ever think again about looking for the mail.

But time goes on, they always say, in these halls. River Grove's elderly homes and elsewhere for the rest. With their gums half splitting their tongues in two, they can't speak from under a thick sense of hunger. Not because they were really holding anything back; they just didn't know what to say without their aid. Would if they could complain about politics and the weather, but can't. Not a thing they could do. Nothing. Not eating, but they knew; somewhere inside, some part of their aging, human bodies knew; they were dying of hunger. And what happens to them happens to the rest, gets recounted at family dinners,

cautionary sympathetic recounts of when times got tough and Granny and Granddad were getting the memory disease. If it happens to just one on Earth, it happens to us all, whether we feel it or not. Times come and end. Time goes on. Wounds scatter and scar and become us, mind and body. He was young like us once. But what can any of us say about that?

They Say He Went Plumb Crazy

WHAT'S NOT TO REMEMBER of times like these, grandparents and kids like those, and deaths like Merel Gene's? The melancholy exchange a frenzied mixture of eras past and moments yet seen? The hammer and key strokes they tend to forget? The old days, and half-certain futures? How they forget and rebuild local heroes? What's not to remember of the places they meet in a sense of community to share a few words?

They hate to see friends die in a recession, so they always ask to be left alone in a place where they don't know anybody. They hate to see long-distance friends' info deleted, so they turn the alert option off, and store it in an inbox. Nobody knew how anybody in the world ever got a person like Merel Gene to go to a place like The Olive Branch, or how many close family members it took to get him in the car.

Nobody knew that someday there'd be a community where everybody had the potential to meet fifty new friends per day, and know them all like brothers and sisters. But this community was found.

And Merel Gene was there.

These are the places they go. And as the same goes for the latter of those places, at The Olive Branch Assisted Living Facility, people rarely ever die tragically— alone or otherwise. They quit going to the parade because of age, or gathering in the media room round their favorite shows because they don't have shows anymore. They get hung up on little repeats and ask the same questions so many times folks just all together ignore their presence, quit looking at them— or *they* get moved to a different hall.

In the throws of elderly dementia, the mind sharpens and dulls itself, strikes deals and renegotiates both sides of the mind's dividing blade. Memories do all the cutting. The mind is born a sword, tempered and refolded, hammered sharp & new— and dies a worked pocket knife rusted shut— but never cuts. The mind is a steady blade, not its wielder.

Memory flays the gray-matter- overgrowth in those early years— an expedition carved across uncharted ground— through tamable unfounded recollections, until finally it reaches the impassable thicket of our memory and doubles back around. In these throws of fading, elderly reveries, petrified and mingling as memory tends to do with age, the frenzied mind grinds its sharp edge flat against our premonitions of the future, and double-crosses

the truths of the medium. In that digressive state, they say, the future holds itself accountable, and mirrors the memories extinguished by the lengths of a single, present moment. Mirrors the memories yet made.

But that's not to say we all reach the dulled edge of our memory in our final days. Even in the later stages of decay, some folks find the proper connections (the right, healthy neurons exchanging all they know), to outwit the demented bouts of their present conditions, and speak freely the old lies of the past. These, we say, are the lucky ones.

Well… they say Merel Gene went crazy, and plumb thought he was wading out across the Nunnley Shoals when Mort hit him that day on Main St. Thought he could feel that thick, red river mud squirming up between his toes when he looked up and saw nothing but antique, American muscle coming down on him— and not the jut of the land carrying Piney River out from the mouth of Polk Hollow cut through Ollie's Bottom, and down right around his knees like it had done a thousand times before. Thought he'd be fine if he could just make the other side without sinking up to his chest in bed mud. They say somebody heard him ask how deep it was not a half second before he stepped off the sidewalk into the parade. And when they say it, they say it like he'd been deranged

for half his life— they say it like he really seen the river. And they might be right. Merel Gene may very well have slipped that far into the disease by then. Who can say what's going on in anyone's head?

The Inclinations of Mr Sage, I

ELMER, HONEY, WHAT you doin out there?"

[At that precise moment a traveling Kilroy™ Vacuum salesman crossed Jackson Ave with every intention of making himself a comfortable guest in Elmer's living room floor. He was there to clean the rugs. Elmer went inside to warn his mother of the impending sale]

…there were all the symptoms of science-fiction spread evenly over the majority of the living-room floor: a fusion of organic bulbs of steel melded into a half-congruent whole unit, a free-form home machine with a gear box and a high-performance-4HorsePower engine, 58 ft. of no-tangle cordage, overdrive, reverse, and an assortment of attachments and decorative, catch-all bags. The Kilroy™ Y1 is universally acknowledged as the High Water Mark of high performance home vacuums.

Alice thought how strange that Elmer— barely into puberty at the time— would be so entranced by the spread of a luxury vacuum kit. Was it the cut-away model of the motor? Was it the novelty of the in-home sales process? Or is every American boy interested in small motors?

He had sold his way, so effortlessly sold his way across their street, up the cracking levels of their sidewalk, to their living room floor— and eventually down the hall and through the master bedroom door.

[Keep in mind that Alice Sage was a widow. A single mother. And Elmer was a Hot Wheels™ kid. He thought

The Inclinations of Mr Sage, II

stock car racing on Sunday afternoons was the bee's knees. The Kilroy™ Y1 was the best. Of course Elmer wanted it. Everybody wants one.]

"Mom. I want it. That's what I want for my birthday."

ALL FIFTY ITEMS OF the attachment kit lay spread like sacred artifacts on the carpeted floor where Elmer knelt. The owner's manual, the authoritative text on the world's

most efficient home vacuum system, was the salesman's personal copy. And now it belonged to Elmer. He couldn't stress enough the importance of keeping up with the Kilroy™ Y1 Users Manual & Service/Parts Reference Guide. He couldn't stress enough the importance of it all. "Basic maintenance, Elmer, is the most important thing to do."

He just stared sublimely into the space between himself and the products on his mother's carpeted floor, replaying the glow of their introduction over and over after the man crossed Jackson Ave, slid weightlessly up their cracking cemented sections of the sidewalk, floated the steps into the view, and walked up the front porch steps. He was brining the hot rod vacuums to clean the carpets, Elmer knew. And through the sieve-like view through his mother's squeaking screen door, the salesman had said with an assurance Elmer hadn't heard before, "Son. today is your lucky day. I'm here to clean your momma's floors."

That was the morning of May the 17th, a Saturday, his birthday. The third Saturday of the month that year.

He'd been less than honest to his mother about his reasons this particular morning for swinging on the front porch swing, which he never does.

"Elmer, honey, what are you doing out there? Are you

waiting for Ruth Ann to leave so you can say hi to her?"

"No. gross."

Of course he was waiting on his popular neighbor girl, Ruth Ann, to come out and take off walking on her Saturday morning walk to downtown like all the kids in the neighborhood do. Then the salesman showed up.

And then he was torn. Stay home and learn the new vacuum operations? Or just go for it with her? What the heck. He thought he'd follow the salesman's lead and just go for it. Maybe it would be his day and Ruth Ann would smile like his mother had when she saw the handsome vacuum salesman coming in. Elmer was on the drift of his hormones, daydreaming and distracted.

It was so effortless. She smiled and winked. Her grandmother had had one when she was a little girl. And Retail Reports said his kind was guaranteed for a lifetime. Whose? None could say. That was of no concern to her nor Elmer.

It was a gospel sermon that sold his mother on God, not the guarantee of eternity. It was the in-home demonstration that sold Elmer on his attention to his own need for a technique (a smooth approach), not the lure of a dustless rug or the promise of a purer air. It was the timing of the words and all the right shading of

tone when describing all the right features that screamed, "you need this. This is alive."

Unlike most things Elmer attached himself to, this memory never left him. He often said he inherited his fortune that day, May the 17th, the day Elmer Sage found his luck and planted the seeds of his future inclinations.

He was sold on making appearances right of himself, deciding for himself what other folks needed to see in him, or what he needed them to see. And by the looks of things, looking back, it seems he had the necessary gait and in fact the perfect chiseling of a chin to make what he wanted of all the time he had to put in to render any degree of success in any kind of life.

He was flashy sharp he liked to say, after he come into his own. He was almost distracted at times in the rows of mirrored glass on Main St. He had looked into the mirrored glass at one particularly high point in one of his days free from his mother's grip— freer from the medicated stare and the afternoons inside the dust of her old house, departed by her crippling mental fixtures— for the better part of an hour while he was waiting on the corner of Donovan and Main for the commuter bus. Those reflections of sunlight that catch everyday in the third-floor windows on the mirrored glass at a quarter after three, those little beacons of commerce, he'd say, are the heavenly light rays down which his dead loved ones send communiques to him when

he they need to wish him Happy Birthday or just check in. And today was his day, so he figured he'd use the Kilroy™ salesman to distract Mrs. Alice, his momma, while he was on his way out. "Mom, I'm going to town."

When passing near along the veins of the town square, Elmer would streak his palms across the eyes looking back from thinning gradations in the mirrored glass, as if he were smoothing wrinkles in a lesser man's face— a face resembling a photograph on his mother's bedroom wall.

(He wasn't old enough for wrinkles yet). His doppelganger was born years before him, backward-looking kind of ghost named Prophet Man. Died the day Elmer came.

He would often think about how wealthy he would have been had his father lived out his life as the man who invented glass.

As if someone had asked him near twilight on the opposite corner from the mirrored building who the top office belong to in a dream, he would half-whisper his own name to himself in the window. *Mr. Sage. Mr. Sage.*

He half-wished he had been born wealthy to a well-respected business man's family; and though he hadn't, and though he wasn't the heir of an inventor's fortune or mind, he felt that close to those reveries anyway.

When here—between buildings and mirrored glass—he was nowhere else. If he wasn't here he was gone, home perhaps— but near. When near he was never nearer than he imagined when away. Like most things teetering between vanished and fixed in Elmer's mind, that dream of being born rich inflated on its own, almost to escape his mouth every time it opened.

And soon did.

[Ruth Ann had just descended her porch to the sidewalk and was headed, most likely, toward Main St.]

He put on his Sunday best. And there on his lips, suspended vividly in the sunshine of Springtime in the South, he puts on a better Sage smile and proceeds as if he had, or would soon— in a more reverent past life, or the coming years— invent glass alongside his father. In his mind it was only a matter of time before he became the first prodigal son of River Grove.

"Hi, Ruth Ann. Would you like to go downtown with me?

"Hi, Elmer. Sure. Let's go."

The Inclinations of Mr Sage, III

“

I'M GOING TO TOWN, MOM."

"Oh, No you are Not Mister Sage; you're still in trouble from what you did the other night. Don't think just because you ain't grounded that you can just go back to your freedoms like you ain't done nothin wrong; you have. And even if it is your birthday, it don't change what you did. And you did it to our friends at that. She used to watch you and change your diaper when I was working nights; he taught you how to run a neck tie knot snug up to your throat and not to suffocate yourself— and that's the thanks they get? And if you think you're going to town to watch that silly show about them real rich kids that really live on that beach, in real life, you got another think coming Elmer Sage. That stuff is goin to rot your brain out, boy. The shows we watch here are just fine. Don Sidwell reruns are just fine. Just Fine! Now be a dear and get your momma some more corn bread."

How many different keys fit a door? How many keys fit different doors? How many doors and how many keys can't find one another in the hour before daybreak, the darkest hour they say? How long before a petty wine thief, a teenage wino, gets caught with his waist band around his ankles in the backyard of his first job, pissing out his score in the flower garden? Who can say? But to the next to the last question, Elmer Sage could answer since he was about

thirteen years old, "an hour and twenty eight minutes, and not a minute more."

Curiosity poured like sweat to the floor from the pubescent brow of the young Mister Sage, who from the earliest age anyone could recall fancied the sweet taste of alcohol. It gave him his first brush with the law when he picked the lock of his neighbor's door, bared his feet, paced his floor, and drank his wine— every half-hour, one fine bottle at a time. Mrs. Karger couldn't hold back the hilarity of it all, when Alice Sage made the call.

"It wasn't his fault at all; his daddy's gone and his voice is getting deeper. Peggy Sue. Peggy Sue, you know I'll beat that boy black and blue, with my belt, my wood spoons, or maybe a high-heeled shoe. Please don't press charges Peggy Sue! The cops said if you're fine, it's fine. Nothing's broke; what can we do? He just took the wine and ruined your smallest marigold bloom. You know he loves you Peggy Sue. He's nearly your son."

"I know he does honey, and Roger thinks it's real, real funny. We'll be home Wednesd'y. Don't you let on that we ain't mad as two wet Banty Roosters. Elmer will have to pay for what he's done, and the things he'll surely do."

Hot scolding she wanted the back of his bare legs to wish the blood back from the whelps to the untouched surface of the skin, and back to his veins again. She wished that too on another man. Whelps like rosy plateaus

on a tanning hide sort of brought a smile, a hereditary half-grin, to the twitch in Elmer's lips, the lips he knew he'd be putting to good use later on down the road, like he heard his daddy did. He always took the beating over the grounding and burned up the night.

"That's your choice," she'd say.

But both of them knew that she'd have chose the beating too. If it was up to her, they both knew. So he sold her on the spoons; he was never touched with the belt or the shoe. Every time he sold her on the spoons, that's what he did; that's what Elmer Sage was born to do.

A hot day it was, a hot day in May,
when Alice Sage bent down to say
to her husband who was
cleaning the kitchen floor,
"Harold it's time; Elmer's on the way.
He's going to be a Taurus, a bull-headed baby boy,
arrogant like you if he doesn't get his way."
Harold dropped Alice off
at the sliding double doors,
parked the car, entered, and
fell cold upon the hospital floor.
The doctors came, but
there was nothing they could do.
Elmer was fine, but his daddy had
done turned a deeper shade of blue.

They buried him a day too soon,
the day before the first full crow moon,
with a lock of Elmer's hair
in his chest pocket, proof
that he'd been born healthy
with a wide, blue-eyed stare.
Proof that everything had always
been off by just a day.
And Elmer would say,
"I may have killed my daddy that day."
He tells it like a real, sublime
joke he's told a time or two.

When she was at home and her spine was on fire from the fusion she had in the lower forth disk of her back, when Elmer was just a boy about ten or so, when the aid would run clean out the next time, like it had done before to the folks she knew, they said it'd happen again, Alice would say, "that's why Elmer will do the things he'll do, done the things he's done; he'll always be bent up from them first few days on Earth. He was born to a mother left alone by a father leaving his son, his only blue-eyed boy."

She knew early Elmer was going to have a tough time when it was time for him to go to school, just the first of many private-public things little boys go through.

"Then he'd learn to be a man like all Sages do."

"Elmer Sage did it," said the little boy with thick frame glasses on. The plump, poor boy that lived on Elmer's street said it was someone else, but everyone knew he was lying. How'd they know, he thought, with all the straight faces he keeps; Elmer's his friend. The boy with the glasses said, "that's what poor people do."

The teacher's post was a frontier away from the patch of pine thicket floor in the far corner of the recess field. The bare lancing knuckles of a cone from a virgin pine bore into the cheek like a wheel of hot augers. On the other cheek, two blistering limestone rocks were soldering ringlets into the meat of his face, where his tears had made miniature circles of mud.

Gathered, ranting, the boys let out a kind of pre-teen-gladiatorial roar that escaped from the pine-needle floor, through the canopy of the thicket where they fought and had fought before, hung for a moment, and then evaporated.

In the under-belly of a hallway rumor someone's brat let it slip above a whisper that Elmer had never before learned to fight; he didn't have a daddy to teach him; he didn't have a daddy no more, never did. But as quick as that rumor escaped through the little brat's teeth, Elmer was squashing it back into his cheek. And the next time

such a conversation arose in the Primrose Elementary School hallways, that bully said, "it ain't true; if he put a whooping on me like that, there ain't no telling what he might do to you."

And Elmer grinned that hereditary half-grin because he never liked to fight anyway; he just did what he had to do. He did what they say Elmer Sage was born to do, and kept to himself— his own curiosities— after that.

The screen door slammed and she screamed, "Elmer… Elmer. I ain't never in my life seen such getting -to-it, the rebel in these boys now-a days, my boy; that boy'll be the death of me and who can tell how many more, lesser women."

(He looks just like his daddy, she thought.)

"Son, I'm gonna tan your hide when you get back here. You get back here!"

(She thought, *what's the use? His genes ain't never once goin to let his mind listen to a word I say*.)

"If your supper gets cold on the table, well that's just where it'll be. Cold."

Turning, a pirouette to the squeaking of a rusted hinge on the screen door, Alice stopped screaming. She had stopped screaming before. By that time, by the time her voice was raspy as hay dust and she just had to quit, Elmer was on the far side of the Frosty Jug, between Al-

corn and Mt. Sinai Rd. finishing his pie, half way to Haddox Square already.

OCCASIONALLY, THAT SPRING WHEN Elmer would come to the square in River Grove— the rarely heard of township community situated along the widest shoals of the South's most industrial river— he would notice the same notice taped to the same door of the same second-rate craft & hobby store beside the place nearest where he would buy his beef jerky and steal the miniature pecan pies nearest the side door, and he would momentarily picture himself dramatically delivering that notice aloud in the street in front of Mark 'n' Rita's Party Store, as he was finishing the crust from his morning pie.

No matter what it said, that notice, he pictured himself sounding a bull horn and asking for everyone's attention as he read the official announcement. *Hear Yey! Hear Yey!* Whatever it said would follow. He had a flare for the dramatic at an early age.

It's not that Elmer couldn't afford the pies either (again a flare for the dramatic), it was simply because he could and got a rush from stealing them. Same with the reading aloud, the public telling causes a rush from the scene caused from something so out of the ordinary said out loud. You follow me?

He caught the bug stealing wine to get caught in the first place, he did. It reminded him of what his future impulses may be, like he used to think, or would, about the

same innate forces that urged him to steal Mrs. Karger's wine that night on his birthday some years before.

Elmer often feels someone in his head trying to remind him of what the future holds for his own body, his own primal inheritance and haggard urges predicting the future. Genetic impulses. Premonitions of the past. Future memories he called them. Call them what you will. Those were the ones that made him want to recite the contents of that long-hanging notice (odd as it is) aloud to the whole town in the middle of Oak St., or Maple St., or any street with a tree name. Just so everyone could see him do it, and say, "That's the boy there. That's Prophet Man's son."

And yet, it was those same forces that kept him from committing such a primal act against the customs of his fellow Grovians, as his father had. We say primal because River Grove is a modest town that works hard to hide its freaks— and works-prays harder for its dignitaries. Works hard to deflate its own collective urges.

Had the authors of that notice meant for it to be read aloud they'd have put it on the radio, TV, or the Web maybe, Elmer thought. It was a written notice for a reason, hung there for some purpose (what is it?) uninfluenced by the fact that everyday Elmer Sage passed on the opposite sidewalk of the craft store window, on the opposite side of the Grove's most prominent merchant strip, right there

in plain sight of the unobstructed public notice.

And though, sure, he could've easily strayed from his intentions on any given day— mostly he was known to

They Say… Lord, They'll Say Anything

WELL… THEY SAY MEREL GENE went crazy, and plumb thought he was wading out across the Nunnley Shoals when Mort hit him that day on Main St. Thought he could feel that thick, red river mud squirming up between his toes when he looked up and saw nothing but antique, American muscle coming down on him— and not the jut of the land carrying Piney River out from the mouth of Polk Hollow cut through Ollie's Bottom, and down right around his knees like it had done a thousand times before. Thought he'd be fine if he could just make the other side without sinking up to his chest in bed mud. They say somebody heard him ask how deep it was not a half second before he stepped off the sidewalk into the parade. And when they say it, they say it like he'd been deranged for half his life— they say it like he really seen the river. And they might be right. Merel Gene may very well have slipped that far into the disease by then. Who can say

what's going on in anyone's head?

But understand, understand— not everybody in River Grove thought Merel Gene belonged in The Olive Branch for all those years. Serious. Lots of folks in town knew better, they say.

They said, "Merel Gene's just fine; just needs a little help every now and then, help that Sarah Belle is in no condition to give, that's all. Just a hand with the tough stuff. What they need is a hospice nurse. And let that man get back up on the mountain, the only honest place where he could spend the rest of these days. God Bless them in The Branch though, they crazy as hell. Not Merel Gene. No ma'am. Not Merel Gene."

And who's to say who's right?

He had up until his untimely death a new square to stroll around now, The Olive Branch Social Square. The boys at the diner say otherwise than some. They say, in fact, Merel Gene can't tell now from then, the new one from the old one, or that there'd been a change at all. He's 15, and that man died on Main St from a mule kick to the forehead. He's pushing 50, and his second son left him for battle. Got tore up overseas fighting a crude tycoon's war. He's 60, and lots of things happen at 60. He's over 60 by a long shot, and age is the last of his worries—, in the throws of old and new memories mingling like they tend

to do at this age, things were happening to his mind. A shameful thought he ought not have again, mixed with memories of childhoods in the river, and that old stomping-ground soaked through with muddy water like it has, and has before: one whole, collective memory to pick pieces from. Some all at the same time, in the same places we all know he was, if he could just recall precisely— just not exactly at 45 or 60, maybe not even 15.

Certainly not now.

His Favorite Show

THE PRECISION OF MERE GENE'S mind when he was laughing at the Don Sidwell Comedy Hour is what shocked the entire staff of The Olive Branch Assisted Living Facility. When Merel Gene was laughing, especially at his favorite show, it's like he'd never been stricken by the disease at all.

"That show was light years ahead of its time, at the time. Lord, a situation like Lil' Joey's (Episode 19, Season 7) might not even warrant a glance up from ya'll nowadays. But back in my time, back when TV never tried to be reality, and not the other way around, content like that was border-line obscene. And Lord knows, it wasn't for everyone. No telling how many times Don Sidwell fought with the federal government. It's a crying damn shame that folks got to fight to be entertained and to entertain those that can't or just flat out refuse to entertain themselves… […] … Christ Almighty! What's a little sketch about a young lady tryin to make her way in the hard parts of

world got to do with offending me & mine, and the way we live? Not a damn thing. When my youngest boy was at war, this show was the only thing that could make me laugh. Hard to laugh when your teenage son is at war. But I knew Adam'd be laughing too. He understood.

"They don't like it, turn their damn channel. 'Cause if you think something like that, like The Don Sidwell Hour, is to blame for all the thinning pieces of this moral cloth of ours, for the holes your hopeless kids are falling through and into and from— then you ought to rethink the way you are raisin' them kids up. Most weaker folks become what they've seen unquestioned, and those that don't just don't watch much television. To a kid with his or her head on straight, stuff like what Don Sidwell was doing ain't nothin more than TV. They got real-life things to do. And they know exactly where their truth lives and where that truth lives— out in front of the lenses… in reach of a mighty fraction of the viewing world.

"Entertain us. Nothin else.

"Hard to put any real stake in an enterprise that intentionally breaks up its own product to remind its customers that somebody else made it and they aren't responsible for content. Hard to put much stake in a thing like deception. we don't need them telling us how to live by showing us how everybody lives in the lenses; they ought to pretend everybody is watching and put on a big damn show for us.

Act like we're here. Enough reality in entertainment. Move us; Make us laugh like Hell & cry like babies; Make us think; Then roll the credits and wait on the next season. I just don't want to see other people goin about life day to day…, waking, eating, working— competing for each other's love. Hell, go down to the diner and just sit and listen to folks. If you get the courage, say hi. They'll talk to you. Hell, you might get lucky like me and find the love of your life. Damn right. It happens like that sometimes."

Thelma's Lunch Box Diner, II

"Solid truth, son. Solid truth. The aid quit coming, and the bad spirits took the reigns. Bad Mojo, son. Bad Bad Mojo."

"Yep."

"Uh huh."

"That's right. The federal government killed Merel Gene McAlister. And they gonna get the rest of us too."

Closing in, I found myself surrounded close by Grovians. Not uncomfortable close on account of close personal space invaded, invaded closely by tobacco lips and wrinkling chin flesh. Close like they all had a need to be heard, all had a drive to tell the tale close and new but known already— all were seeped in that oratory heritage that passes down through generations of folks native to the region, this region where the past and time itself takes on flesh and becomes heavy in the damp sweltering air— then dissipates in all directions. That close.

Even the lady behind the counter knew the whole story, though she herself knew none of the parties involved directly, and she says she rarely leaves the diner… and rarely takes a break, and never closes. Which reminded me, "Fellows I hate to, but if you'll excuse me I need to use the restroom real quick, and call the office… let them know I'm still here, let them know I'll be in Tuesday morning with a full draft. Please don't leave yet. Ya'll got a story to finish. I got a story to be finished. I rarely leave the office since I got moved up. One of ya'll said it, I believe. But how did the authorities rule on his death? What's official on the Certificate?"

"The federal government drove him to it, that's what! Drove him to kill his-self."

As I was about a half-pace from the restroom door, I heard the oldest man at the elbowed bend of the bar say, "Tom Cat; sit down." He did.

"Son," I turned back. "The aid leaving didn't have a thing to do with Merel Gene McAlister's death. Things like what happen to Merel Gene, accidental machine and creature conflicts, fouls in the natural parade flow, been happening at that parade for my whole life. Conflicts of machines against all man's faults ain't the case, just pure accidents."

"Tell it. Oooo, tell it."

"It's usually creature for creature here. And we have to

consider work livestock a machine, since they're here to labor— not think. Not sink under the weight of overthought, like folks tend to do in a crisis like this one that got Merel Gene. [He paused to sip his coffee.]

"When I was a boy, me and Daddy seen Baker Willis get kicked right between the eyes by one of Donnie Batey's show mules. Killed him right there on the corner of Cardinal St. The noon sun glinted against the curb where the blood settled and kicked up a mirror in the reservoir from the late afternoon sun, jetblack reflecting on the drying pool— I seen my face there in his blood. The blood still there; always will be. Daddy said he didn't see exactly what happen. But I did.

"And not many years after that, that young boy— I forget his name now, he was a friend of mine then— got shocked near the court house water spigot when the city was puttin up new 'lectric lines. I seen that too. That's just to name a few I've seen. And that ain't that many really. Think about soldiers.

"Think about refugees of genocide. Think about nurses in the ER. Think of a people in famine. Think of the deaths they see— then consider these accidents in a parade. These things just happen; there ain't one reason why.

"Sometimes it's as simple as two matters entering a single space. Think coordinate plains in a high school areth-

metics course. Think marbles in the dirt out back when you was kids shootin for whose glass was gonna take whose.

"Sometimes, it's simply a matter of two incongruents. Earthbound tangible phenomena. Marbles that look like Earth make the stakes higher for everyone. A matter of physics. Plain, Mars- lookin marbles get less than Earth. Everybody knows that.

"That's how it is with Merel Gene's death. The coupe bigger and faster than Merel Gene claims the space every time. He is constantly crushed for the first time, and re-crushed each time after in memory, simply because the coupe bigger and faster than Merel Gene claims that space every time. No matter how many times he steps out in front of Mort Taylor's hot-rod coupe he'll be hit and crushed— and the parade bound to be delayed.

"But not for long; it will finish sometime near dusk. It's rarely more complicated than that…

[Another sip]

"Naw, it wasn't the government, or Mort, or the aid leaving, or the folks at The Olive Branch Security Office slipping their duties, or his family for putting him there, or the town for hosting the parade, or even Merel Gene for walking out into the parade that killed Merel Gene.

"Believe me, odd as that sounds. These things just happen. We sweep up, weep a little, and we get on with it. Get

ready for next year's parade."

"Well, what was he doin out in the middle of the parade alone then?"

"Right! Surely them folks at The Branch Security didn't let a senile old man stumble right out the front door and all the way out into Main St— he not having a clue where he was?"

"He intended to be in that street, that space. You sayin he wasn't?"

"All I'm saying is that he got out the front door too quick, and in his overalls at that! Just WHY the Hell was he out there at the parade in his Bird Dog™ overalls then? At The Branch they wear them backless, paper gowns?"

"To see the people he loved." The oldest man said. "The reason we all go."

Temporary, brief-temporary but temporary, silence settled into the diner. Folks looked at the oldest man not sure he was talking about the same incident, or separate, or one unfamiliar to them.

People he loved? Huh?

But they didn't dispute him, or answer him, just overlooked it. Moved on.

I found my seat back at the masonite bar. I had my coffee topped off. And like before, they all started in again— after a quick recap:

"Listen, you with us…? Son, I don't believe I caught

your name.

"Lonnie Edwards."

"Lonnie, can I call ya Lon? Lon, you gotta son or daughter?"

"No…Oh, well name him Jimmy after my daddy when you do. Why don't ya… anyway, Lon, the government cut the aid checks, ya with me? Merel Gene started asking about his oldest son, come down with dementia, and got hit by Mort Taylor in the Old Timers Parade, one year later Mort shot his-self. Nobody seen Merel Gene get hit but maybe a kid named Elmer Sage, maybe, and he's a juvenile delinquent maybe not to be trusted. And the rest there too. Mort never said a word about what happen and he's dead, so he ain't sayin what happened ever. So, nobody really knows. 'Cause some say Merel didn't have but three girls, never did have a son… but folks here know different. And some say Elmer was turned away from Main St at the time. And we can't say here about that, but we got an idea, as most do."

I'm not sure how many years ago this all happened, they never said, yet. They started in this time to talking about all the people involved, all kinds of things. Somebody said Merel Gene didn't have but one son; and he got killed in the war. Some said he had three and two disowned him. No girls. Some none at all. Some he lived in Polk Hollow, not on Big Brotherton Mountain. Some said

he moved there from the Southwest years before.

So like before, I couldn't tell you who was doing the main fact checking. No need I supposed— just that I glanced at the oldest gentleman as he sipped his coffee in silence at the elbowed bend of the masonite bar (stuffed of apple fritter, ash and coffee stains on the bar below his chin) and catch the wink.

Confirmed: Elmer's daddy died from hitting a curb at the parade. Merel Gene died in the parade. Mort Taylor killed himself, died on parade day. The oldest man seen another man kicked to death by a show mule in the parade. And another got electrocuted near the courthouse just after the parade ended and before the BBQ cook-off began. Elmer's momma's daddy took his life too on parade day. Turns out there's a whole string of deaths over the years on parade day.

I couldn't tell you when all this happened. To them it's still happening. It's like everybody that had died over the years on parade day, died all in the same year. And still dying. Seems ever couple years or so a member of the community dies on parade day again, and the smooth flow is temporarily disrupted, and they're still happening. Deaths still in progress. They're all dying together, here, on the same day, in the same Old Timers Day Parade. As tragic as that seems for River Grove, there is hope down in the Grovians as long as the parade rolls on. They've never

missed it; that's what they say.

Those folks will keep dying at the parade; no doubt about that. But they wouldn't miss that one come Hell or high water.

"So did he see what happened?"

"Who?"

"What's his name? The boy?"

"His name is Elmer Sage. Old Goat McArty's boy." Otis said.

Everyone on the fringes of the conversation perked up when they heard the Old Man mention Elmer Sage and Old Goat. The back roar of conversation noise settled a bit.

Elmer and his mother were a (and remain so) a primary cause of contention surrounding the issue of McAlister's death. Did he or didn't he see the moment of impact?

Old Goat

Old Goat they called her by then, calluses slick as marigold petals— her friends said she married a little young. She'd bend them tongs down and pick that biscuit pan up out of the bottom half of the Kalbonator™ double wall oven he bought her shortly after they were married in the chapel on the square, like she's handling delicate waste from the base deposit of a Cold War reactor.

"Glowin," Alice'd say, "boy you'll burn the prints clean of them fat finger tips of yours if you snatch that thing up with your hands. Even with them thousand-gram insulated mitts with the fire-proof palms, that pan will unmark them fingers of yours for good.

"For Good," she'd say.

"Young Man— honey check the bird…Elmer, check the damn turkey. What other bird could I possibly be talking about.

Goauw! Boy you scare me sometimes; you're just like your daddy. He didn't have a lick of sense either. Ya'll would've fit right together," She'd say years later.

Boy if Harry could have heard all that, warnings about burning the distinctive marks right off the boy's body in some freak baked turkey accident— something one-ina-billion, them freak turkey things that never ever happen (He'd of laughed), least not to the majority of folks who ever walked the face of this earth, this Earth, though sure it's happened before at least once— *if he could have heard all that, he'd have told Elmer to do it like he did it, the way it ought to be done,*

"Elmer, just nod your head YES MA'AM boy, and be done with it. Shit. Ain't no man, woman, or child got charge of what you and yours' got to do. Smoke and mirrors, son. Let on you agree; then go on about your way, whistling your own tune, tapping your own boot, whatever it is that ya'll do nowadays when ya'll feel you got a good feeling secret to keep. Only folks got charge over you is the court judges, and they don't care about which small folks and family members you lie to, or how many times your daddy floated and fished Piney River with their daddy, or their daddies the same, or that ya'll's kids liable to do the same too. Or how much you did or didn't get around to volunteering, or will, last year in this community, or next. They just want your vote son, so do you and your daddy a favor and always make it count, and wait your

turn for the pole. You understand. And remember. Never sew your sleeves up in a blizzard, my daddy used to say. Your arms will be warm, but you won't be able to use your hands, never be able to even write your name in the snow. A person needs hands to survive a blizzard, and after, if he makes it through alive."

Yes sir, no doubt he would have said it— if he'd (Elmer) have ever gotten to talk to the Prophet Man in person.

If Alice had really known the whole scheme of things, as she claims, then before she ever said I DO to Harold Sage, and before she ever seen him really, and if she really knew what was really about to happen on that hot and heating day in the middle of that sweltering May parade some odd springs ago, as she said she did, and if she'd have known Harold was going to forget what day it was parade day and skip a curb in his truck to avoid the high school drum line on the way to the Meadow Lark when his wife was plumb two hours into labor and late 'cause he'd been out drinking for five days, (she didn't know what day it was either!) and if she'd have known that by skipping that curb by Haddox Bank Harold would jar a clot loose that neither knew about and send it right up stream into the last beat of his heart (the heart he tried like hell to detonate with down-home aggressive chemical stimulants for years) and if she'd have known all signs her mother

could have taught her, but her mother died when she was still under a year old, then. She. Would. Have. Known that Elmer would never, ever meet the Prophet Man. Not in person or any other way.

In short, if she'd have known like she said she did, then none of these things would've ever happened. And we know the did. So, we take it for what it is: Alice mistakenly thinking she could change or manage the ways and activities of the lives of people other than herself. Lives set in motion long before even she was born. Lives even before River Grove was ever settled by the white man.

Alice, by then

Alice the widow in labor.

Alice the new mother.

Alice alive to Love.

Alice and Elmer.

"It's better that Harold died. The men she's loved been leaving that woman all her life."

There didn't exist a single photograph of the man, odd as that is for his time and place. Not that he didn't have them made; he did. Handsome as the Devil, they said. But Elmer never seen a single one, and Alice just played like she thought they all burn up in a house fire. If she'd have really known all that she thought she should've, there wouldn't be any Elmer Sage, not under any circumstances— not in this town anyway.

But how could anyone know something like that? That's one of them one-in-a-billion freak turkey accidents. When's the last time you read on the front page:

Drunk Man rushes wife in labor to

Meadow Lark, Skips bank curb, barely misses parade crowd, jars clot loose, dies in waiting room floor. Mother and Child unharmed. (?).

Jarred loose a lodged clot that stopped clean up his poor, twice-defibulated heart.

You ever hear something like that? Such a tale?

Dead at the hospital dead.

Dead dead from such a string of events.

Not in a lie for a long time, friend.

And you sure ain't heard it in any truth tones either, not in the Herald, the Peddler, the Expositor, or any two-bit penny rag round here. But that's the truth of it. Harold Sage plumb stuffed his heart full of what fifty six years of 'the finer things in Life: rye whiskey, Quaaludes, teeners and fried chicken, among other things' had left deposited in the loose corners of his body. The secret to his prophecies.

The McArtry Sisters

See, Alice was the youngest of the four McArtry Sisters, and Harold's daddy was friends with Merel Gene McAlister's people who were distantly kin to Johnny Wayne McArtry out on the Ridge, Alice's daddy. Harold is Elmer's daddy. Alice grew up not knowing her momma, and by their adolescence, Johnny Wayne, her daddy, had plumb give up on trying to regulate his wild bunch of rebel daughters.

Cindy jumped off Brock Island Bridge when she was just fifteen years old at the request of a band of half-drunk junior and senior boys from the town just east of The Grove, the poorer of the two towns. Broke her ankle on impact, and still she said, "told you boys I'd do it."

Of course,` Johnny Wayne had to crawl out of bed at near two in the morning to rush her to The Meadow Lark. Of course he was mad. But he wasn't a screamer though. He just sat grinding his teeth in the still of the stagnant

waiting room while the doctors set and casted her up—hoping this wasn't an omen of things to come.

Of course, it was an omen of things to come.

Maddie Grace ran drunk off Hwy 51 in her momma's old, leftover drop-top sedan just three days after she got her learner's permit. Took the old car joy riding at midnight with her best girlfriend Sue Ellen, who was twice the drunk Maddie Grace was at fifteen. Sue Ellen's daddy was the best shiner in fifteen counties. Johnny Wayne knew right away what the culprit was: down-home corn liquor.

Old convertibles and corn liquor don't mix.

Corn liquor don't mix with anything.

Hahaha. You said it there Tom Cat.

And by the time he got to her (she didn't call the police, just her daddy from a truck stop pay phone down the road) they'd done finished the rest of the jar and passed out in the back seat of her momma's old, leftover car.

"Well they can't say you ain't mine; you got that McArtry/McAlister drinking streak that spans near two miles wide," he'd say of his second oldest at times like these.

But that streak skipped his third daughter, Lily, somehow. Lily was the laid-back one of the bunch. Lily's taste was grass. Got caught smoking grass in the junior parking lot of River Grove High some odd year after the Old

Timers parade. Violated probation three times after that 'cause she couldn't (or wouldn't) kick the grass habit.

"You get that from your momma. She was the same way when she was your age. Still wouldn't've kicked it, if she'd have lived. She's had a life-long love affair with that plant. And it ain't a secret. She first tried grass when she was just fifteen. And like many folks from her generation, Lily was bound to die young. And she did."

"I forget what it was. Some folks say she did it on her own. Others that it was an accident. No matter. They buried her down there in the Haddox Gardens by the Old Pine River. Rest In Peace, Lillian."

"Amen."

Johnny Wayne figured that age to be genetically predisposed to teenage feminine rebellion by then. So when Alice was coming up on that age, Johnny Wayne said, "honey, so long as you fly half-way straight until you turn eighteen and move out on your own, and you ain't my responsibility legally anymore, though you know I'll take care of you as long as I live, I won't say a word about whatever it is that you want to do with yourself. Your sisters have done all but beat this old mule down and out, and that's okay— Losing your momma and Lily nearly broke all my heart, but I'm okay."

But Alice didn't take to the bottle or the grass like her sisters had. Matter of fact, across all venues of adoles-

cence, save your minor skipped classes and occasional smart mouth, she was a perfect angel. Good on her marks at school, polite, punctual, accommodating, shy, pretty, soft-spoken, and generous. Finely developed traits, they say, for a girl without a momma or friends, and sisters out living hard all the time.

By seventeen, her angelic disposition began to burn an ulcer in the lining of Johnny Wayne's gut, a fact he couldn't escape or explain. Didn't make a bit of sense to him. Torn rivulets of blood he felt seeping up his esophagus, he thought. But nothing. Not a single drop of blood could the doctor find. Something not there. Not tamable by antacid. Not even physically curable. All a fixture in mind.

The other three girls experimented and learned good lessons from wild rebellions in the night. Not Alice. Not ever. And Johnny Wayne got to thinking. Thought it might be healthy… he began to renegotiate the truths he knew not truths now or then… to get these things out of the way before the innocence wears off and those transgressions stick in their bodies like kookaburras in a burlap sack. Thought it helped move them beyond dependence and learn the essence of responsible, independent living: to be strong-willed women like their mother.

And then it hit him, a hewn rafter in the derelict quarters of parental (human) enlightenment. He saw coming to Alice from that deep curse in the land of the young and

the lonely: a self-depreciating recoil from the impulses of life. Which for Cindy, Lily, and Maddie Grace at that age, or any age, he never worried. They were too much their momma's stubborn, and Lily was gone young: love.

Love sickness. Alice had fallen in love. But not Love. And she let that boy do her wrong. And Alice fell in love. She let that boy run around on her. And Alice fell in love. And she let that boy beat up on her. Alice fell in love. And that boy ran away to sea. While another boy was home on leave about to deploy for the jungle to the new Conflict over seas, Alice fell in love. And she let that boy lay unloved in a young bachelor's coffin, name never whispered again by pretty ladies. And Alice cried. And Alice fell in love. And Alice cried. And that boy laid there too long after. Until Alice fell in love. And that boy just wanted to be friends again. So, Alice fell in love again. And again, that boy was gone. And Alice fell in love. And all the boys and their friends loved her back. love then, love before, and to the coming love. And Alice fell over and over, sometimes twice a night in love, fell for the, "no one will know it's our secret little love" trick that the heat blind suitors play on Alice in love with love of love.

Until finally Alice fell out of love. Love.

Not just with the boys, not just her family, and not just with the world, but with herself within, and so all of those things together, gone— a tragic and pretty little girl falling

the hard fall from Love. And she didn't mean to, and never thought for love or Love she could in one million years do it, and would reupholster a threadbare magnified Earth a half strand of Love at a time to take it all back, what she did, but she did and almost refused at first to believe it, not regret it, but believed it then, she did—she (her mother too) had, out of no fault of her own, broken her daddy's heart. The final break in the old mule's heart.

Of course Johnny Wayne felt that he mounted the whole of the weight on her, felt himself to blame for every ounce of loneliness that filled the core of his baby's soul.

"How's the widower to raise little girls alone? Man do all he can raisin' four girls by hisself. One gone now. Honey I did my best. The ponytails I put in your hair weren't the straightest, and I don't know what colors match which, or how to use a curling iron, or press pleats in a skirt—but I did my best… and I couldn't tell you how…to kiss or lay with a boy, but I just don't know how to show her, you, how to carry her body like a young lady should. Aubrey Leigh, lady of my dreams, if I ain't missed you every second since you took your body back into the damp earth, I'm makin up ten-fold for it now…our little girl needs a momma, or she may never be…"

Two days before Alice's last senior class, a hotter May

Saturday than The Grove had seen in years, (one of her particularly lonesome days in a sweater to hide her cut arms where the blood had flown out like feathers), one month and four days before she turned eighteen, just a short time before she could ease her daddy's mind (she thought by her passage into legal adulthood she'd cure her daddy's guilt of her baby burden on him, she like a burden, and her mother's suicide, and Lily's death like the eternal burden, but in fact he never wanted her to leave, and she wasn't a burden at all, but a blessing in disguise)—Johnny Wayne McArtry, an honest hard-working widower, father of four, friend, and former loving husband to Aubrey Leigh (suicide herself) took a hand full of little yellow hexagon pills, swaddled himself in a patchwork quilt, and went to sleep beside his youngest daughter's bed.

Odd as it is, strange and melancholic as it sounds, tragic as most found it to be, when Alice returned from the parade she found her daddy's body cooled and curled in her grandmother's favorite blanket in her room (not the bedroom where her parents had laid two decades of humid nights together), she saw herself whole again. She had seen him there exactly, same haggard repose, a thousand times before when he would fall asleep reading her the night tales: brides and knights and wandering arrow-makers and gentle creatures reared from hard magic clay. She saw him there always knowing he'd wake sometime in

the night, someday, once he thought sure she was safe and dreaming and capable of true Love again.

Love she felt out from the bindings of a stagnant past (Love evolves with us), out from the renderings of her world unloved. The last person on Earth to Love her unconditionally just passed that responsibility on to her. Father hand to daughter hand, and back. One hand for the two of them. And her father had joined her mother where he could be happy again. That's what he said to her, the peace on his face said, his brow now smoothed of its deep furrows, handsome man. She thought if he were alive in another life (and not her father, but another handsome boy from River Grove) she could have loved him like her mother had.

The static charge of silence ground itself between them, and her world was quiet. Love was all around her. And she just held him there.

Alice & Harry

SOUNDS LIKE THE FATTEST bullfrog croaking beside a pond just two squared feet short of being called a lake. Which might not sound like much, but it would get it on the state map. Elmer'd always tell his momma when he was in that real curious, innocent piece of youth (that piece right around five or so, maybe six) about them time-keeping tuba growls he heard at the parade.

'"They would go Douououououoummmm, Bououououm, bum bum-bum, DA Da da… and it sounded like a… like a... like a bullfrog Momma, like a boat horn. I said momma did ya hear that? We were at a parade momma, and we are havin so much fun! And Derek my friend from school was there. But he is on the other side. Clown said I could eat the candy momma, but I couldn't go to the other side cause I might get hit by fast cars … ok? It's okay to eat the candy?'

"Listen, she'd say. "It's okay to eat a few pieces. But listen to me Elmer, honey…I want to tell you something

funny… about what your daddy used to say them sounds sounded like.

"He'd say, 'Sounds like some old bored farmer done up and taught his team of mules how to sing and tuned their vocal pipes up good for them. Didn't it, Alice? Didn't it?' He was real funny like that. Mmmh, mmmh, mmh; your daddy sure did have a way with words— he sure did. You called it a bullfrog and he called it a mule.'"

Most times she'd leave it at that. This time included. But Elmer hardly heard the deep-whooping growls after he got to be a teenager—

"You sure do have your daddy's hair," they'd say— all those folks that didn't mind to admit that at some time or another they had known or met Harold Sage, which was a few then, and still less now. Most folks in town would never have admitted to knowing a, "shade tree like Harold."

That's exactly what they'd call him. They'd say, "I ain't never once in my life met that shade tree. Never did— just heard all the stories about them things he done."

"Rumors like these— (no need spreading them here, Harold was an addict, NOT a murder, a rapist, an adulterer politician, a pederast priest, a criminal chief executive officer, a wife beater, a child beater, an animal beater, a traitor, a wife-thief, or a vagrant)— flowed like water through River Grove.

"Most folks in town, older generations mostly, had in

truth met Harold Sage (and remembered him for his kindness and his handsome smile) at one time or another. They just cared not to ever say where or when." Tom Cat piped up, finally.

"And when folks suspicious of him would flare up about the nature of his character, everybody would run his name through the mud. 'Cause that's what they heard their folks do.

"Lord have mercy though if Alice Sage ever heard one half-out-of-line thing said about her man. She'd fly plumb off her rocker, hit the ceiling fan head first, and turn her face blood red when the slightest bit of slander surfaced about Harold.

"'Honey that Mr. Sage, your man you say, has done knocked boots with every woman in town between legal and just-shy-of-getting-discounts. Some just outside that range too.' Sally Yates would give Alice the hardest time.

"Lord have the mercy on me, they should have asked when Alice caught wind of rumors aimed at her dead husband.

"'Listen here tramp,' I can hear Alice now— 'I ain't never had nothing against yours but I ain't goin to have ya'll little chicken-peckers out here spreadin rumors about mine on account that not one of you gold-diggers is happy with yours. Not a single one of ya'll got a thing better to do than rot on gin, and concoct all heights of steamy

lies about that good-lookin dead husband of mine— God rest his soul. Had his faults, yeah. We all do. But he was a fine man, and would have been a fine daddy too— much finer than them swine ya'll root around with. Where's Ernie, Sally? Twelve oclock tee-time? Honey, they been resodding fairways at the club; the course has been closed for goin on two weeks now. He ought to be out with that little waitress from Thelma's, those were his plans for today, anyway..."

The man called Ernie laughed out loud. The rest of the diner followed suit. "Lon, Sally is my ex-wife. She would say something like that." Ernie added in and then winked at the waitress who was bussing tables and polishing silverware. He nodded at Thelma for a coffee top-off.

Tom Cat and William Ray, forget now which on— probably both— continued on.

"As she nearly got to looking like she was going to bust, she'd mellow herself, sublime herself upon the timbre of a near-evil, thinly-veiled voice, exact as rain. 'Careful not to get my wine on your new shoes, Mary Jo. That'd be awful. Just awful. Wouldn't it, Mary Jo? Be awful to get this wine all over them new shoes. I know I just don't know what I'd do if somebody got wine on my new shoes. Uncareful somebody was to keep the wine in the glass. Mary Jo.

"Alice didn't mind a bit following through with anything she ever said she'd do if she had to; but that ain't to say she always wanted to.

"Calculating that woman was."

"Agreed," they said in unison.

"Smartest living person he'd ever met."

"You didn't count chance encounters in dreams or flashbacks, occasional as they were, when Prophet Man would meet with the masters, he claimed when he was higher than the light bill. He'd met Edison and the lot for cocktails on Tuesday in a frequently recurring Liars' Club story.

"He was born the bastard brother of Poor Richard Saunders—

"Prophet Man and Einstein skipping rocks by the city lake in downtown River Grove—

"Harry HooDoodini and Nikola Tesla on a beach in Spain shooting paper rockets at the moon—

"Harold was never right to begin with, because he'd tell stories like that all the time, but she loved him. Lord, she loved him. And it didn't matter where she was neither, or who was watching.

"She might've stood out in front of the choir on communion Sunday cussing the daylights out of every elder on the gospel side of the pit, if that's what it took to defend the good name of (she knew Sage was a real good name

the first time she heard it) the good name of the father of her only blue-eyed baby boy. If that's what it took, Alice would take up arms in the church house to right what she about Ralph Harold Sage, her man."
thought was wrong about whatever it was folks had to say

"'Billy Roy, why don't you tell everybody what everybody has bought in the back room of your store over the years. Harry took to building matchstick houses in AA. You keep tellin everybody he's hootin crank I'm gonna bring the whole armory over there and get to work. I'll burn your damn store to the ground and tell them I did it." And believe it; there ain't no shortage of arms and church houses and work in this part of the world; and there ain't a shortage of furious lovers either— never has been.'

"Never heard of him." That's about all most folks say when someone asks them if they ever knew Harold Sage."

Merel Gene McAlister, of course, knew Harold's daddy his whole life until he died when Harold was a young man. He took to Harold like he was his own son for awhile after that, until Harry thought he could handle his urges. But they drifted apart.

Harold's daddy and Merel Gene grew up together up on the mountain. He was there the day Harold stood to

tell everyone, for the first time, he was clean. He thanked Merel Gene for it. Turns out it wasn't true. But that was the first time, back before he met Alice— back before he had set in motion another life.

The Music Stopped

ELMER DIDN'T NOTICE UNTIL all of the sudden the music stopped and the parade quit coming.

That man did get hit. I saw it in the window refection. I know he did. Elmer thought.

"What are we suppose to do?" a face in the crowd said after noticing the body.

"See, this parade can't just out-right be stopped half way through what could only be called in The Grove's eyes the final act, what they called it then & now; and they only call it that when their time comes: all those folks who had folks in the third and final section of the parade.

"Stopping that big of a parade with that many people would have been impossible— easier to just let it keep on going after it gets past the scene. And everybody would get to see their favorite section, the finale, sometime.

"What time? It's different for everyone, every time. What time the final act of the Old Timers Day Parade starts depends on where you are on the square, in whatev-

er year you happen to be there— if it's a half-normal year where nobody dies you see in your memory, it's liable to be, or have been, six-thirty before The Future float and the third leg of the band rolls past you. Use that as an estimate to guess your own time. The parade goes on like that, but every year the timing is about the same, just a little different.

"Now, if it was that year, the year Merel Gene or any of them died, that scale fails you every time. If it was that year, and you were all hemmed up near the party store, as many were that year 'cause Mt. Sinai was closed for construction, at the far touches of Haddox Square, well then you didn't see the final brass, or the Haddox Community Caboose until just at a half-hour before sundown, as the long shadows of the procession began to follow The Future (the ending theme float) back toward the school where it all began— in and out of the packed veins of River Grove, like an army of marching band soldiers.

"If it was that year, you saw clear as a bell those shadows, the exact premonitions of next year's parade, and those previous processions all following the 110th back toward the 1st. If it was that year, as it could have been and you not know it, lord! — if it was that year, and you were that far down the square, then you missed a historic fiasco. But if you ain't ever been, you ain't missed much— less you think you might like to have seen such a tragedy.

"What was the council supposed to do? They couldn't cancel that parade. They'd never once— not for flood, drought, famine, war, recession, depression, disease, or any other undreamable circumstance— canceled the Old Timers Day Parade. Others had been.

"Just a few years back the Halloween Parade was canceled on account of an Internet rumor. And that's to say not another word about that rumor here; it was false. And that's that. River Grove moved on, and the city officials made up for it by letting the city parade council host an extra benefit raffle and jamboree to raise funds for the families of these folks who'd been devastated by that false rumor the previous year.

"They couldn't just send the community home on account of an old man stumbling into an old car near the sidewalk of Lodge's Jewelers, near the front of the old folks' home. Or a mule kick, or a shock, or an OD, or a blood clot, or any the others we have or haven't mentioned yet, and won't get into here but just a cause: the heat strokes, the sudden infant deaths, the murders, the ones from asphyxiation on hard candy, the teenage lonesome overdoses behind the radio station, the ones from skin cancer caught in the hot parade sun, the ones we'll never hear about, the ones yet to happen. All those.

"Lord naw, if anything we ought to want to stay with each other when these things happen, not alone in our lit-

tle houses.

"We ought to be together celebrating the lives of the parade-watchers that have left us to join in, to be what the parade is celebrating, they always say.

"But don't get me wrong, somebody said, that ain't to take light away from Mr. McAlister's tragic accident, as some say it was, others not, on account of the romantic melancholy-hum that deaths like his leave in our ears.

"The tragedy is how we ain't sure what was going on in Merel Gene's head at the time. He was one of the more lively residents at The Branch. He had far more good days— days when all the right brain cells were firing and he was about himself— than bad. Who knows what kind of day he was having that day? Merel Gene seemed to have been that kind of man, goods and bads.

"That's what that girl that tended to him at The Branch said, anyway. She was in here not a week after Merel Gene got hit. And we asked her how it happened, and she said nobody seen a thing." Ernie finished with few interruptions.

"Well, almost nobody," a female patron in a scrubs spoke up. "A boy name Elmer claims to have seen the whole thing, but they tell me at The Branch that he ain't right… sort of a hell-raisin' little hood."

She continued, "anyway. I see it like this: I took care of the man for going on four years, and believe me he was a

sick man. It's hard to understand unless you've seen a person not blink an eye or make any sort of effort to keep from going on themselves, bodily functions that is, while they look you in the eye and tell you sharp detail about the first time they heard their first-born son say 'I Love You.'

"It's hard to watch somebody's dignity so conflicted, so at odds with itself. I don't know why he did it. I don't know if he meant to. I don't know where he was going. I don't know. I just know that he had bad days and good days. Days he was sick. And days he knew he was sick. That was Merel Gene McAlister. That was him."

News of the Parade Hits the Web

THE YOUNG FOLKS BLOGGED, saying they'd seen it reported on the regional rag news just moments after it happened, and ignored the life lost for the hot wires of the Web. Too regional to be of any real relevance to them, they say of content— when they overlooked those heaps of hard, tragic local news blurbs, and continue scanning their new new-friend requests.

With these request procedures so informal, it's nothing new to get fifty a day, on some social sites. Some even more. That means, far as other generations know, the users get fifty new people to grow up with, and watch the kids grow up with.

Fifty weddings and fifty birthdays. Fifty invitations and fifty baptisms: fifty main characters to read, each with fifty plus stories to tell in a month of Sunday readings, after the closing hymn, and everybody rises to pray— for health and rain, among other things.

Fifty new people to know when they die, as far as they

know; these are fifty people just like Merel
Gene.

But what they don't know is that whichever site they use, it wishes them all a happy birthday, congratulates their engagements, manages their events, suggests to them people to meet, alerts everyone of their newly added family photographs at the precise moment that symbolic moments like these arrive, symbolic as they are. It's a more efficient way to live, they say. Because all they really want is to be reminded to remind their friends they care. So that maybe in return, they'll be extended the same kindness someday. A sympathy card for the new-agers.

But not to mourn; that's not how these friends interact, not in this generation. If a recently-added or favorite friend ceases to be listed on the network, they don't really cease. Not really.

They just switch to a different network, and alert their former friends via email. And if some of their friends from their former networks don't get the alert, well, they just weren't friends then. Or maybe they don't pay the internet bill, so even though they may need to seek their friends out for a friendly conversation, they won't be able to. Most of those folks are thousands of miles away, and they probably would have a hard time in person anyway.

No matter. They'll just have to find another way to network friends, or quit logging in all together.

They (the young folks) were surprised neither by Merel Gene's death, nor the casual nature of its acceptance in the community. Most of them had never heard of Merel Gene McAlister, until after the whole calamity of the parade. Even then, what they heard lingered like the last seconds of smoke in the winter flue, and slipped away.

They didn't know the status and the facts of Merel Gene's life. They didn't know who he was, or what he'd given up for River Grove. They didn't know about the time he kicked up a bed of yellow jackets so gigantic when the city was clear-cutting that very lot where the new school, their school, sits and got stung so many times his face swelled up bigger than a full-moon hub cap. Swelled up so big they had to rush him to the Morning Lark Medical Facility three towns north up the two-lane from The Grove.

Didn't know he could have been a competitive sprinter, but River Grove never had a track team— not at that time anyway. But he was a community man, and he walked the square. He put his value on his own time spent in the community with the people he knew— that value, he'd say, is enough to fill any woman or man's heart, so long as they open them to be filled.

That's what the Good Lord gave us mouths for: Singin and Kissin.

They didn't know for forty years he played Santa at the Hatfield and Haddox County Christmas Socials. They didn't know they'd sat on his lap when they were young.

They didn't know a lot of things.

They never knew Merel Gene McAlister never missed a Sunday Morning Service since his daddy hung his-self from that big pin oak tree out behind his momma's house up on Big Brotherton Mountain when he was just twenty five years old— a baby in the grand scheme of his own spiritual history. Left Merel Gene looking for a family life, like he'd always known he would have when he was young.

They didn't know folks got lonely like them back then too. They didn't know how similar life is for everybody regardless if the talk is about *the everybody back then* or the *everybody now*.

They didn't know a bunch of things about the generations of humans that came before them. But what Merel Gene did at the parade was no surprise to them (the young folks), they say.

'The facts are there,' they said.

'Search it':

Alzheimer's patients wake up everyday and make up a high percentage of the total number of people killed each year at community-wide, American outings. Where there's a crowd gathered close together, the number increases two

-fold.

If there are automobiles present— running or not— that second number nearly triples. "What shock is in that sort of news?" They ask.

He could have died on Christmas Eve in the community center in front of the whole town with a little boy or little girl on his lap asking could Santa *please bring her grandad a pair of new eyes in the morning*. Wouldn't have shocked them a bit. She wouldn't be picky about the color: blue, green, brown, or hazel, or even pink. Just so Pawpaw can see what everybody was talking about.

He could have died holding a tear back to make a little girl happy on Christmas Eve. '*Sweetheart, if I only I were as magical as you are wonderful.'*

He'd have held that tear back if it was a flood, despite the fact that she'd have never seen him cry, or anyone else. And never would. And probably better for it.

If only he could've died in service to community one more time.

McAlister was that kind man.

But the young folks don't have the attention or the humility to be shocked, or consider the tragedy of a thing like that. The blogs say otherwise when they speak of the generation of forgetters.

But if they would have seen all that— seen the significance of these symbolic moments in his life— they

wouldn't have known what to make of those symbols. They couldn't tell for sure what those sorts of qualities in a person meant to people: Love of the land, community & family. He'd have still been a numerical figure saved in-screen— a numbered elderly death preserved in ones and zeros. An Obit written by computer algorithm. He'll join them in the after life on the web."

"Merel Gene's nurse during his days at the Olive Branch just let him keep on believing them new generation volunteers, no matter what they said:

"'Our generation, thanks to huge leaps in medical technology, will live an average of thirty-three percent longer than the generation before us, and forty-one percent more than the one before it.' He believed every minute of it. Thought that generation held some universal truth to longevity. How are people supposed to feel about something like that? The numbers don't lie.

"What's to be thought of Mr. McAlister's death if not that he went plumb crazy and shuffled head first up Broad St., out into Main, toward the hot-rod section of the annual parade? Nothing more than that. Unfortunate thing had no clue where he was headed. Lord, lord… as much as he talked about it, he was probably looking for his son, like he did at every parade after they quit talking."

Thelma's Lunch Box Diner, III

"SO, HE WAS JUST LOOKING for his son? is that what ya'll are telling me?" Lonnie asked.

"Good Lord, No,' they all said together. 'Didn't you hear a word we said?'

"Every word of it. And it sounds to me like the old man had most of his mind. Was mostly of sound mind, but a bit disoriented. Sounds to me like he was out there looking for Daniel."

"Everybody knows Daniel was drunk the day his daddy died. And deep down, Merel Gene probably knew exactly where he was during the parade. We can't say for sure exactly what happened. I mean, everybody has their own theory. But we can't prove a thing. We all know that."

"So why do ya'll keep on talking about it then?" Lonnie asked them.

Because Merel Gene was a good man, and we hate to forget a good man. Besides, we always talk about the parade this time of year.

"Well… what happened?"

"To who? When?"

"You've heard it, for the most part."

"To Merel Gene and his oldest boy, Daniel. What about the funeral? Did he show up for his daddy's funeral or did he get too drunk to show, like it seems he did most things in life?"

"Well… see, Daniel Boy went through all kinds of pain growing up. Lost his brother Adam in the war and he never let that go. Thought if God had to take one of them he should have taken him. That's what Daniel thought. And it was the fallout from his sadness and lifestyle choices that drove the wedge between Merel Gene and him. Not to mention added to the burden his marriage was suffering." Ernie spoke up.

"To be honest, Merel Gene never did care for Daniel's wife Angelica. That's what got the wedge between him and Daniel started in the first place. Merel Gene used to come in here and complain about her nearly every morning. He thought Daniel hung the moon when he was a boy; he thought his boy deserved a whole lot better woman than that Angie Loveday." Otis added.

"Tell you the truth, Merel Gene had been dying for years before he actually died. Mostly from just pure old heartache." Tom Cat said.

"Well gentleman, I got to know. Did Daniel go to his

father's graveside and make his peace?

"Is he still with this Angie girl? Will I ever know exactly what happened to Merel Gene?

"Does this story end?

"Or will you all just proceed as long as someone is listening?"

Thelma looked up from her crossword puzzle with a look that said, 'I told you so.' The lull between breakfast and lunch had set in, but the only thing that changed really was the dry-erase board. *Meat-N-3. Your Choice of Roll or Cornread.*

Danny & Angie, I

THAT WAS THAT, AND the photographs didn't lie; they told half-truths. It had been that way since prom senior year when their pictures were off-center and cloudy, like they'd been taken from the hip through swatches of unearthly gauze. And still now on their wedding day, those lingering swatches left marks on the proofs.

She wore a veil, but swore there were ghosts in every image with a need to flee into life outside the photograph. Swore they could still see her. Former lovers, ancestors, strangers perhaps— but who knows? He wasn't sure what she meant by all that— if she saw them there in the room, or not— or if she actually thought there were ghosts in the negatives, or just the final prints.

He just left it alone. Because he believed in the effects of the romance and history of the spirit world on the living, and thought if there were ghosts in their wedding pictures, he hoped he knew them at least, or would soon, in some part of his past or future life with Angelica Loveday.

When the party was rehearsing, or some other preparation was taking place, Angelica would go on and on about the days before the photograph was invented, before the first daguerreotypes were ever dreamed of, as if she could remember when lovers had to be painted if they were to stay on earth together after they were gone. As overheard from days of old, and oddly romantic as all that sounds, to Angie it was a solid old truth of the heart. Everyone was flawless back then she'd say, even when they were gone. "Photographs of a dead grandparent just make everyone sad, stark closed in time like a vacuum. It's real hard to be sad at a painting of young lovers, gone or otherwise, they could be anyone," she'd say.

And Daniel knew the truth. Only the wealthy could afford to sit still for more than a few hours at a time to be painted. But never mind, he thought. Their lover's escape was just a few hours away. There wouldn't be time for the paint to dry.

What five years will do to a life has been undeniable since the first photograph was taken. Everyone from the first feral child to the leaders of the modern, free world has been caught on thin sheets of chemical paper. Everyone has been dipped in chemical solvents and hung to dry in a dark room. Most folks have been seen flattened, at one time or another, as valuables and keepsakes to the

people that used to know them. Some have hung in the world's high galleries, some over cast-iron wood stoves in the countryside; some have been left coiled in their canisters, undeveloped on shelves under dust— some in 1hr. photo trays, unmarked, unclaimed, names unknown, no date on the labels. Flat.

But most frequently, above all the final resting places of an image, they make it to the underside of a sticky, transparent album page. They make it there, and become a memory.

This is the era of the heaping image, the pack-rats heaping up the past. This is where— under a mass of portraits— she'd say the dead confuse our photographs for a life still being lived by the living and try to re-enter that world, our world, through them.

"This is," she'd say, "where through our flattened and captured figures on the page, we wait in light and shadowplay for the ones we know (and the ones we may soon recognize)."

Nearly four and a half years she kept on and on about the timeless oil portraits of the old world. She had a need to be painted— them… together. Or else the marriage would never last.

And when she asked Daniel for duplicates of the ceremony and the reception for their anniversary, he bought her paints, a palette, and a generous assortment of real

horse hair brushes— a sort of love tap, love ya, baby… She took it right in the side like a flint head. She never let fall a single, solidified blob of paint to the surface of the hand-stretched canvases he bought her. Pure, knife sharp insults of a *little girl's dream*, she called it.

[He missed it by one whole day, her birthday, their anniversary, rent. Everything; off by one whole day, as the sweethearts' story goes.]

Aside from the certain peculiarities expected from public and private humans, Daniel and Angelica were no different from any other young married couple in a small town along an industrial, American river. Occasionally they fought, they were happy though. Pulled at wits end apart, at times, spread sweating thin across the surfaces of fading flannel sheets— a full range of marital movements in plain view of the room they made humid together.

They'd pull their photo albums apart after sex, when the opportunity presents itself most naturally, fling photos round the room wearing nothing at all. It's what they did, they'd smile at their memories like proud, personal historians of their own lives— she usually more than him.

She'd slap him on the arm and try to get him to smile, but he'd only grin a half-grin, one he'd seen somewhere, a family photo— but it usually took awhile to remember where, and who.

He'd wonder how she spends so much time preparing her look for a job in medical billing. She thought the same thing about his look at home. Nothing to be thought more than a passing thought between them, and how it is they felt for one another.

"Why dress up so much, just for work?"

"I like to look my best everywhere I go Daniel. You know that."

"It seems more than usual lately."

"It's just you." She said.

Daniel was a modest boy from a modest family who lived in a very modest part of the county, the mountain area north of town. Everybody knew his daddy well—loved him like a town son, or elder in his older days. It's hard to talk about River Grove without talking about Daniel's daddy.

He hated that, Daniel did. Always has. Because his daddy would tell, he'd say, the same stories over and over and over and over and over again. Sometimes back to back to back to back. Sometimes one real long one that keeps retelling itself over and over again. Sometimes a short one that would never end.

"The river this… The mountain that… When I was your age…You don't know how easy you folks have it… Of course that was back when daddy was livin… 'fore I was even man enough to get a handle on my own life…"

And he didn't want to be anything like that.

Daniel, if he was in the right mood, could walk, talk, sound, and act just like his daddy would, if he was in the right mood. But never was. Daniel had heard every one of them tales at least a hundred and seventy three times. And that number really just gives you an idea of how exaggerated, and in some cases under exaggerated, Daniel and his daddy could be at times. Stubborn and willing to submit, all at the same moment.

Angelica's parents were divorced— her mother four times and her father three, twice from the same woman.

Both had for the majority of their lives lived outside the city limits.

She didn't want his parent's life; he didn't want her parent's lives either.

He didn't blame them though, as she may have thought he had, he knew that whatever plans people had the right to make, fate (or chance) had the power to undo— just exactly what it did:

What ten years will do to a life is unmistakable. Daniel got laid-off from the piston factory. Angelica got benign skin cancer below her left eye and had to quit smoking and going to the tanning bed. Daniel got a job pouring concrete and started smoking pot again. Angelica got scripts for Valium and Dexedrine diet pills and quit her job in medical billing. Daniel got hurt pouring the footing

of a new Petro-N-Go and couldn't file for workman's compensation on account of his pot habit. Angelica got hooked on betting on Internet horse racing and celebrity gossip, valiums and dieting.

She'd dream she lost fifty pounds the week she lost all her money on a horse named Elvis, precisely a bad dream, and had to pawn Daniel's daddy's solid white gold pocket watch to get her scripts filled and put everything on the chestnut-colored Mr. Ratner, CEO. She'd dream about taking a nap on the infield lawn at Churchill Downs, thin as a rail.

Daniel switched, at the suggestion of a very close friend, from pot to narcotic pain relievers. Old men or his pharms he'd call them, himself the pharmer; his babies he'd shave fine on a straightened hose clamp, and snort them up his nose through one-dollar bills, or post-its if he was broke, pharming. They had no children.

Angelica's hot habit for late-night ramblers and booze kicked back in (she run around on Daniel when they were younger) and they both started drinking heavy, she at the lounge, he at the house and occasionally at the lounge. She took up with another man. Danny saw it was so on the front page of The Herald. What ten years will do to an already unfit marriage is unmistakable.

Danny & Angie, II

What fifteen will do to a life is undeniable:

Several years back, seventeen years and two weeks past the day they met exactly, a man named Leroy Hayes set fire in the back row of that *church* on Haddox Square where Danny and Angie were married. Angie was with him.

He and Angie— as she was sometimes called then on her WeBliss profile online— had met for drinks one night at The Maude lounge. It was the first time they'd met in person. He was a friend of a mutual friend (on WeBliss), half a friend. He had lived in River Grove all his life. South part of the county, the low country. Each had seen the other, but they'd never spoken. They met *in the Web*, Leroy'd say.

See, that *church* doubled as a shelter. Leroy had a grudge on a poor man who stayed there and who owed him money for narcotic pain relievers and a pinch of hydroponic

grass. In the chemical and alcoholic haze he was in, he was only reminded of this debt when he and Angie passed the chapel that night. He said he "aimed to fix that problem. Right now."

They slide in easy. They never lock the back door in case someone needs in for food or shelter from a storm. Angie, as he called her from her profile, mistook his intentions for stopping at the church. She shoved him against the fellowship hall back wall and began to unzip his pants because she thought he was handsome, and she was drunk. Afterward, they lit two candles they found in the storage cubby in the podium and stretched out across the fellowship hall stage. One of the homeless tenants heard the commotion and opened the double doors to see what it was. Leroy and Angie left in a hurry. They went back to The Maude to keep appearances up. She forgave herself later that night and went home. Him too.

[She was expecting someone later. Leroy had already left town on his next job. Their fire would smoldered itself out— never anything more than quick flame after they realized what they were doing— and she would later tell her would-be guest they would just have to wait until a better time, a better time and place to meet. Not with him.]

On her way home she passed the chapel already in flames. Haddox County Fire & Rescue was attending the

blaze. She told Daniel about the fire she seen on her way home from work. She said she worked late. He was drunk on the sofa where she left him that morning. He didn't care if they put it out. Danny saw that the chapel auditorium was intact and the fellowship hall was gone the next morning. He was on his way for a drink. The Herald was hot of the press. It read, "Two Suspected in Chapel Fire: Leroy Hayes & Angelica McAlister."

"You see the paper, Danny Boy," the bartender asked Daniel.

"Yep. You gotta room available?"

"I'll get it cleaned up for you."

A week later, three days after Sarah Belle got Merel Gene into The Olive Branch, Danny McAlister moved into the last room at the last remaining biweekly motel in the community, a place where he intended to pass. A place called Maude, or The Maude in some cases.

Patrons would say while they were away, but about to be on their way, "We goin to see Maude for a round or three. Don't kid yourselves boys and girls; three won't even get my whole tongue wet, much less this ole broke heart of mine."

He died, conditionally, subconsciously, irrationally, three kinds of deaths in the lounge (never physically) decipher-

ing the unfolded coda of their marriage hymn, their last few years together, variations on a theme of death and dying by old and new flames:

The first time she killed him, & vice versa, she looked past his shoulder across the lounge through billowing fronts of neon smoke. Now he knows what she saw, and she what he assumed. Leroy was a handsome man, but Angelica was looking at a sign for WeBliss, an up-start regional dating site. Leroy wasn't there that night. But Daniel was half-right. Though she hadn't seen Leroy yet, and she was half-right. Danny thought she was just drinking too much.

The second time he did it to himself, & her to him, swiftly with the flat of his left palm between her temple and the soft corner of her eye, (she dropped the knife she was swinging at him), some kind of nausea he felt for her and himself after that. Daniel wasn't a violent man, Angelica not a violent woman. He'd never before hit a woman, ever. She'd never before been pushed to near-fatal action toward a man, or desperate threat. But how does one live with something like that, either of the two, already doing what was done before either has time to be stopped?

The third was mutual, forever. And they never touched or spoke another word to the other again. Both'll tell you the same.

He heard she died in a house fire.

It was mentioned she got remarried.

She may have moved to Tucson to her cousin's house on the other side of the continent.

Who knows?

But, as they say, in River Grove all sounds echo off sounds and light as birds light, the echo of a rumor through town— deep into the lingering reputations of its good and low down freaks and dignitaries. It made no difference to Daniel though, that bird was gone (as the saying goes).

He was going deaf in the white noise of the Wurlitzer jukebox in the corner of the lounge, blaring all his favorite spirits of solid gold country tunes.

He knew then, he'd tell the barkeeper, what Angelica had all along known to be true of ghosts. "They all around us, Pat, in the pictures and records we keep. The rituals we reenact, the music we listen too. You ever just listened to the end of an old blues album? That's when they start singin. I should have listened to the ghosts. We should have listened together…"

Never in the lounge though. Patrick, the owner/operator/bar-keeper, never lets the music stop long enough for anyone to hear what Daniel was talking about. The Maude is a place of business. The hits just keep on comin. So Daniel was talking to himself, really. And Dan-

ny didn't mind.

Daniel became Danny for good, it seemed. From the back corner of the fireside lounge of The Maude, the noises of the motel universe mixed into one drone of bar sound, a hum. The noises meshed like separated light reentering and recombined in a prism. Back into one white streak of static existence. No variations. No form. No rainbow. No color. White Noise.

He hunched over the head of a luke-warm beer and carved tallies in the table, the claw marks of an un-gospel bird, a lonesome crow. Come to think of it, that's what he was drinking, Lonesome Crow™.

The regulars said Danny sort of faded into the atmosphere of the lounge, no form, a sort of half-outline inseparable from the table, the wall behind him, untraceable on the bottle that props his chin up.

They, Daniel and Angelica, may well have already been surrounded by flames that first day they were joined on the square, nearly twenty years ago. Those may very well have been the flames Angie was talking about that night, as far as the story goes of the longest burning church fire in the history of River Grove. But as far as Daniel knew, the lounge was fireproof.

"Danny Boy! You seen today's Herald? A man named Merel Gene McAlister walked out into the middle of the

Old Timers Parade yesterday and got run plumb over by Morton Taylor in his hot-rod coupe. He's all over Main St it looks like. Check it out, Danny Boy? What do you think about that?" He had to scream over the Wurlitzer.

Danny heard the name. No one really knew him here, so they didn't make the connection. No one really knows anyone at The Maude.

Danny didn't think. Danny knew.

He glanced one quick time toward the Wurlitzer. What's Next?.

He half-shook his head and dragged his smoke.

Tears welled up in the corners of his eyes.

Tears ran down his cheeks.

Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain came on.

He couldn't speak for a moment.

He turned back toward the bar and signaled for another double.

"Wonder where they'll bury daddy?" he whispered.

The Funeral Chapter: For the Folks with Broken Hearts

When's the Last Time Ya'll Seen Daniel?"
"Ask Aunt Cindy where the Lion Sleeps"

"Call Ottie, Jr.… Well, what about Dottie?... When?... How?... In Polk Hollow Lake? Well, I'll be damn. Did she hit her head or something?...

"Well I'll be damned. Floyd never taught her how?... like a rock, huh?... Well I'll be…, Hell; how old was she?... We'll all be lucky to make it that long.

"What was she doing at the lake at her age anyway?... Oh, there is;… since when? Well, why the Hell didn't you put Daddy in that home instead of the one right on the main road?

"The Olive Branch ain't got no water. I mean like a body of water, Christ! Aunt Maddie— you think they'd let them folks die of thirst? He loved that lake… […] …

"I guess you're right. I'd rather get hit by a nice car on Main St. than drown plumb to the bottom of Polk Hol-

low Lake… […]…where God couldn't hear me screaming…I'm kidding. Got to laugh in times like these…

"Well I just don't know how to get in touch with Ottie, Jr. then if Aunt Dottie's gone. Did they find her… you know,… what was left?

"Really…? How long? Lord have mercy; it ain't like what they make it look like on crime TV is it? I know it wasn't a crime! Preserved huh? Like an old cypress log in the bottom of a swamp…

"You try Cheryl June? Give her a ring; she ought to know about Daddy anyway. Why didn't ya'll call me 'bout Aunt Dottie…?

"I told ya'll if ya'll ever need to get in touch with me holler at Aunt Cindy and ask her where the lion sleeps… she'll know exactly what you're talking about…On The Ground, In a Hole, Aunt Sherry. The Maude. My hole.

"Me and Daddy quit speaking, that's why!

"THAT AIN'T THE POINT!... What do you mean…? […] 'cause I knew she'd never call me all the time like ya'll been known to do, worry a poor man to death over that telephone. Lord have mercy I'm getting off this thang!

"I'll see ya'll in the mornin."

The industrial thickness of the drapes hung there in his room at The Maude fighting a good fight keeping ultraviolet radiation at bay, while Danny half-slept through a

hangover on the morning of his father's funeral. He says hangover.

After he seen about his daddy on the front page of The Herald a couple days before—

After he counted backwards the number of days it had been since he last seen Merel Gene—

After stopping somewhere around two thousand and sixteen days of silence, he wasn't close—

After the bartender said, "That's it Danny Boy; there ain't a single drop left in the well" clear, dark, or brewed—

After he run clean out of coins for the Wurlitzer and the sun was just about to clock in—

Daniel "Danny Boy" McAlister stumbled down to room 112 at the north end of The Maude Hotel & Fireside Lounge, hit his pillow with the left side of his head, and went to dreaming.

[The phone rang.]

He couldn't quite meet base with earpiece on the bisque-almond motel phone when he was done, couldn't remember at all what it took to end a call on a telephone like that. Still drunk, phone finally on base, Danny went back to dreaming.

[The phone rang again sometime later]

When he arrived at Hooper & Hall Funeral Home & Chapel (just a block off Haddox Square from where his

daddy died) an hour late, everybody whispered at first, then took to trying to make him feel welcome by the solid oak casket his momma picked out.

Hard to get comfortable leaning hungover on hardwood. Hard to get comfortable at a funeral.

They knew Danny and his daddy had a falling out some years before. They knew they ain't talked since, so they'd say, "How are you Daniel? How are things? He looks so peaceful don't he? Merel Gene McAlister sure did mean a lot to folks around here. We want you and yours to know that. He's the first of our generation to go; and with the aid done gone, the rest of us be joining him soon enough. And poor ol Morton Taylor'll be sick to his stomach's nerves for the rest of his days 'cause of all this. His nerves'll probably get the best of him before he finally goes Home, goes to see your daddy.

"And when we get there we goin to get Merel Gene too so he can tell us something good we don't know 'bout the heavens, like he always did, like he was always doin. Your daddy sure was a good man, good to your momma and you kids, the community too. When was the last time you seen your daddy alive?"

The moods of these ceremonies range as wide as they come:

Thankful he's on his way to a better place; some say

Home.

Relieved his burden has been relieved.

Melancholic in the corner watching uncomfortable folks barely known.

Sympathetic to the entire ambience of loved ones and strangers coming and going through the heart of the parlor.

Heartbroken by the loss of a father, brother, a mother, a daughter, or a one true love.

The range of moods is wide but typical they say of small town Southern funerals, most folks would move between several of those half-genuine temperaments over the course of a normal family viewing.

They go from *delirious* to *reserved* to *comforting*.

Attached to *un-invested*.

Reposed to *sympathetic*.

At times *ambivalent* toward the folks with broken hearts.

But as for Danny, his mood was fixed in regret. He and his daddy had a falling out right after him and Angie's fifth wedding anniversary, when Daniel mentioned he and Angelica may be separating for a time. When it's said like they say it in River Grove, it ought to be that they get remarried every year on the same day 'til one of the two dies, whether they were a couple or not. It's a cycle like that. So Merel Gene said not (about their separation), and left it at that.

In time they quit talking all together. But Daniel and Angelica tried hard to stick it out.

Fifteen wedding anniversaries put a hard strain on some of the most decent human beings that ever lived, least that's what Danny would say. Others a much harder strain, others would say. Others no strain at all.

Merel Gene seen coming the one thing that he always thought he'd hate to see the worst if it was to ever happen to any of his kids or grandkids. Hell, he had seen it coming since before their fifth anniversary, nine and a half years before it ever happen, but kept it to himself, he thought. Honest face gave it away though. Then the silence.

Daniel knew the truth, though, of how his daddy felt about Angelica Loveday ever since she snaked her way into winning homecoming queen right out from under the feet of the truly deserving Williams girl when they were seniors in high school. Told everybody she was pregnant, and would love nothing better than to end high school on a high note before her and Daniel started a life together. Then told everyone they lost the baby, after she won, and cried in the middle of lunch. Her friends cried with her.

That made it awful hard for Merel Gene to put much stake in the holy union of his eldest boy. Heirs are nothing to lie about. News gets around River Grove. And if Merel Gene couldn't put at least ninety-five percent of his faith

in something, then he just flat out convinced himself that that something didn't exist, and never would as far as he was concerned. The other five percent he accepted unquestioned on account that no one soul on Earth is perfect.

That divided Daniel all to pieces. Angie couldn't care less the way he treated her for what she did, what she won, or what Merel Gene thought of her parents, or what she and they thought he thought of 'em. That divided Daniel all to pieces. He loved his daddy (and his wife-to-be at the time) and wanted them to just accept whatever it was that they felt between them, and let the hostility rest. Daniel wasn't sure he really knew his daddy much at all after the falling out they had.

So, when they first asked Daniel about the last time he seen Merel Gene, about the last time he seen him alive that is, he'd tell them about that dream he had the morning just before they buried his daddy's body (regal-like) in the muddy banks of Old Pine River:

The last time I seen Daddy alive I passed out in my room and dreamt:

a roughly familiar voice came up on me in the middle of the desert, hinting at the sterility of life there. 'Where were you when water was born?' The voice asked. 'In the last remnants of summer's dance in the cool ashes? In a field by a river? On some pity trip with yourself and all your demons?

For my amusement and overall taste for things of mythology
And history— vague as I am, clear as I can be—
I was in a side channel reservoir of a dream river,
Aeeing a dying farmer wade where water was born out of

Earth, water reflecting Daddy laying with his under a pin
Oak tree, heading west 'cross a shoal's thick red mud,
Fom the places we bury them as ashes, handsome things,
Where boots print briefly before the near- desert air

Thins itself across the exposed dune lines, bared & naked,
Taking with it any memory of my last visit to that earth.
That's where I last seen my daddy, in the middle
Of a desert beside a river: the mingling landscapes of a dream.

That's where Daddy said he'd meet me behind
The choking cough of the wind to watch the departing needles
Fall from the last virgin pine on our homestead atop
Big Brotherton Mountain, blow clean across the latitudes

Of Earth. He said his daddy was meeting us there.
He did. He said we'd all meet there sooner or later.
Daddy was older then and we walked across
The river together, dreaming, then just me—

Leaving new imprints behind in the parched and bare land—
On the un-inherited Earth. I was back in the desert.
I— Saviorless… On the other side I was alone
At first, and I saw Daddy again. He was a younger man

At the edge of an old, drying farmland and the desert.

"How's his yield on this plateau of dust?"
I asked Daddy of his daddy. He said nothing,
Just pointed to the lady in the bonnet, his momma

Looking out across the field. Only it didn't look
Like his momma, but it was. She turned to answer, "
This Earth no rain, save every few months or so.
The ground dry of dust like talc powder off arid blades

Of plant life; the oaks as matchsticks swaying the arid pulse
Of sulfur billowing from the desert's cough, the choke of the land,
Or the illusion of life waved up like radiation to reveal the sterile
Duplicates of another homespun family, doppelgangers of

Countless McAlister boys and Bonnet gals as far as any
Eye could see. "We have no lasting life from the cracked
Lips of the field." In a barren field facing Daddy's momma,
I thought of antique myths he told me (that she told him)

In the field where he and I were young, after the farmer's
Wife (his daddy's wife) had already passed on like a
Softer grandmother. He asked me if I knew what the death
Of a cherry tree means to a farmer.

'Means poison, livestock's goin to die if you don't
Snatch off quick the wilting cherry leaves.' I dreamt
In agrarian remedies, thinking homespun acts of divinity,
Proverbs from the almanac, and fresh squash

As I dreamt I asked Daddy to save me from the river.
I dreamt I was drowning on dust from the field,
And wished for the river." The earth forgives the desert
Of its intrusion of dust and reminds us of the reasons

We all breathe. So we can live to dance and sing
For rain. Do you breathe for the rain anymore, Daniel?
Can you feel the heat lightning in the hairs on your neck?
Can you feel a thunderstorm in your bones, son?"

[The bisque-almond motel phone rang]

Daniel let the voice and others in on his dream later that morning, after he slept again.

"Almost didn't have time to answer. The dream was gone like it was flash boiled and evaporated under the heating shrill of phone bells. Aunt Cindy was calling to let me know I was running late. She wasn't mad though; she never was one to judge anybody. Probably because of all she's been through. That's why she's the only Aunt of mine I'd ever give my thoughts to. Anyhow, I mumbled a few lines and passed back out."

And like a thunder and rain cloud soaked full of ground water, sleep released that dream from its gullet, and let it drip back over Danny Boy:

Only this valley dream air parched of dust do I
Have the pleasure. Wrapped in the cool bonnet
Of a Southern girl, Momma turned sterile, crops fell.
She had just lost her second born in vain, in a conflict overseas.
I was at the homestead as a young man near twenty-four
When Adam got back to Big Brotherton Mountain in a box.
He wouldn't be the only one that year. The kings drank

The cradled water dry, the water well. The region got dusty.

We were watching war on the Web by then, strategic
video feeds, pixilated (slightly delayed): Shock and Awe.
The previous year it flooded. Daddy'd say when he seen
It on the TV news, 'Who knows about the great hoarders

Of good water?' Never answer himself though, but asked
Again, 'who knows an orphan or two?' Winter sat in.
Water dried froze." There ain't no bones and skin without
Water. Winter's coming soon." It's here. And at once it rained

A colder rain. Momma wept for the new water born, tended
The wildflowers (winter had mingled into spring), returned
Half to the cemetery where he was waiting, a second son
And first brother, a teenage soldier gassed and gunned down

And burned and hanged and stabbed and drowned and
Sniped and death celebrated, lost in the throws of young
Manhood. Then went home rearranged, to see Momma and
Daddy. The other half she kept for herself (really someone

Else) knowing she'd need them sooner or later.
And she took deep breaths and picked her basket up.
She returned those Adam-colored flowers to the ground
On top of Big Brotherton Mountain.

Danny talked about dreaming of a home where his loved ones still live on during holidays and in photographs on the wall. When they (old folks at events) hear folks younger than them talking about these symbolic tradi-

tions—family holidays, and pictures on walls— they get to feeling like everything is going to be alright. They forget about the aid leaving. They get to thinking back to the times they all got together and went out and did this and that, poked around town and shot the breeze. They remember meeting at parades to mingle with the community. They get to feeling a few years younger than everybody thinks they are, several years younger than they really are. They get to wanting to plan weekend trips. They get a taste for a glass-bottle soda and forget where they laid their sugar meters, usually by the guest book— which reminds them where they are and why they came.

They start getting premonitions, not realizing they'd been there before. Déjà vu, really. Hooper & Hall Funeral Home & Chapel was the only one in River Grove. Of course they'd been here before. And they will be here again, when the time comes.

When Adam burned up over seas and got back in such a mess that not even his momma could recognize him—

When the television war spilled over into the Internet war, gallons of blood spilled over the Web and earth: Shock & Awe—

When not any real grief was felt in them screens like there was up on Big Brotherton Mountain, least not for the McAlister family—

When they quit watching the news after Adam died—

When the heartache got to be too much, they did the one thing they knew to do: They kept on praying for rain.

Then Merel Gene almost went out like Floyd Abe, his daddy. He came to his senses as he was dangling near the edge of Big Brotherton's highest livable peak, . He was dangling from a big oak tree that had been there all his life. Then he thought he ought to hold on for the sake of his other babies. He can't dive into the afterlife and bring Adam back for Sarah Belle. He can't re-write what his God had already written. So he flexed his neck, reached into his bib overalls and grabbed his tobacco knife. He cut the rope and took a breath.

No telling what losing a baby might do to someone. But Merel Gene held on; he was that kind of man. And it don't have to be said, but that's the pin oak where he found his daddy hangin nearly three and a half decades before. But Merel Gene was alive, thinking maybe by saving his oldest boy he could reconcile the two deaths: Adam's and that one that's been eating at him for almost four decades: the boy whose daddy sent him off across that rice patty thirty-seven springs ago. The boy he killed in his war. The collateral damage tallied in Merel Gene's heart.

Danny missed his younger brother Adam's funeral on

account of an over-shot of the prescription pain relievers he cooked in an old silver spoon in the back parking lot of Hooper & Hall Funeral Home not ten minutes before it was scheduled to start. That's where Merel Gene found him afterward wrapped up in his suit coat with the smallest prick of blood on the inside bend of the left sleeve.

He wasn't overdosed, just had enough to pass himself out with the car running. Just a taste. And being the man Merel Gene was— knowing Daniel was alive by the rise and fall of his chest)— he didn't take to yelling and screaming at his oldest boy. He didn't let on how shredded up he felt inside by the death of his youngest. He was worried about the spiritual health of Danny Boy. He knew where Adam was.

He knew how resilient the body could be; it was the weight on Daniel's soul that worried him. He didn't mention how much it would worry him if he were to die before Sarah Belle, his wife of thirty-two years at that time. Days like these it's hard to think of anything but bad weather.

But he didn't mention that here. He didn't worry about those things right then. He just slid in through the passenger side door and leaned over to hug his oldest son and say, "I love you, Daniel. Boy, what are me and you goin to do without our little buddy? You remember that red flyer snow sled I got ya'll that year. Ga Lee…my baby boy…

[…] … That kid… I told him there ain't no good use for fightin these kinds of wars when you're just a boy. That's what I told him; they ought to let the old folks fight the wars that need fightin. That way we won't have to talk all the time about all the lives cut short and the babies we've lost. I'd have fought in his place if I could have. I'd have fought for you too Danny Boy, like I'm goin to now. Let me fight for you; I know what you are doing here son, what you're goin through. I know about you easing your pain like you do. I tell you son, ain't no amount of anything man ever made that can fix the way we hurt in this life. Hurtin's just part of it. Don't make me have to burry you too Daniel. If that be the case, they'll have to throw me in that hole too. Switch seats, son. I'm taking the wheel. Me and you goin to drive this thing off so your momma don't see you like this. She has enough to worry on for the rest of her life, now that we done lost our baby boy."

And that's what they did until the big blood moon was hanged over their heads, high enough that both were sure Sarah Belle was long, fast asleep.

"Daddy, I never intended on seeing Adam in the ground; damn this regret I'll surely, one way or the other, try to numb it before it kills me. I don't want to be numb Daddy, folks got to feel. Hurt or not; times I just can't take it. Angelica won't even see me. Says I ain't fit for life when

I'm on this stuff. If you go before me Daddy, I promise I won't miss your funeral. I promise. I love you. I'll bear it. I couldn't do it Daddy, we still babies…still. That wasn't Adam… wasn't just Adam. It was my brother, your son, my brothers' and sisters' little brother. Momma's baby boy. An American Son."

Whether or not the memory of that promise in his dream is what finally woke
Daniel an hour into the final viewing before the funeral of his father doesn't make a bit of difference now. He kept that promise either way. He went to his Daddy's funeral and made his peace with him.

He reacquainted with some old family members, and met some new ones. He met his Great Aunt Alice's boy Elmer. Elmer told him he was at the parade where his daddy died. Daniel said everybody was except him, and that maybe if he had reconciled with his daddy years before he might not have gotten hit by Mort's hot-rod, because they would have been there together. His daddy wouldn't have been out looking for him. Then he said he didn't know why his daddy was there in the first place because his momma had told him that Merel Gene quit going to the parade when him and Daniel quit talking. And

Elmer said that he didn't talk to his daddy either. Daniel asked why. Elmer said because 'he run out on me and

Momma.' And Daniel said, 'whatever you do in this life, Elmer, make peace with him for the things he done, really just make peace with yourself through him, leave his wars alone. Else you'll just hand them off for yours to fight. And that ain't life being lived, but an early handle on a long drawn-out private lonely thing. All the time thinking about when that thing is gonna happen to you. That ain't no kind of life at all…'

But—

Before he woke, they say—

Before he passed by that place on Haddox Square where Mort Taylor hit his daddy, where his own blood had seeped permanently into that black pavement and for a brief arresting moment he thought he saw his own face reflecting back from the mirror in the blood stain—

Before that heavy red oak lid was pulled down over his daddy's heart—

Before all that could happen in the progress of historical time, he had a wide patch of wild apple-thorn trees to wade barefoot through in a dream. He hadn't woke yet.

[The phone is ringing]

He has painful, necessary lengths to walk in the dreamtime of his own past, they say, in the dreams that always come cloaked in the disease of remembering what might

have happened yesterday.

So, the dream goes on of Sarah Belle planting the other half of Adam's flowers. This is how they say dreams like these go.

Danny come up on the widest part of the Nunnley Shoals and waded out into the middle of the slow-moving body. Like he was reacquainting himself with the ghosts of everyone who'd ever stepped foot in Old Piney Rive—

Like they knew his mind when he dipped his head under the cool water as if he were reintroducing himself into the community, back from the solitary wild, he only come out in that mountain air with the things of his mind he knew to be absolutely accurate of his life. Of what he remembered about the hours before the sunrise of adulthood.

"It's always been dusk," he'd say, "where I've been. Always left rendering portraits of life in the dark. Absolutely." He'd say of that dream like it were a version of real life, like dreams can be. "Absolutely," he'd say. And then he pray:

Always somewhere along the shoals of a wide, slow-moving
Muddy river the moon is born in the burl of a pin oak tree.
Always somewhere a father is telling his son he's A baby
Bird. Somewhere a baby bird is teaching himself to use

His daddy's knife-song, preparing for seasons he may
Never see. Somewhere a pretty midnight farmer lady is

Planting wildflowers in the cemetery on the hill; she
Hears that bird and others like him. Somewhere

An old pocket watch has three holes in it, some pin oaks
With a yellow ribbon round their trunks. Somewhere the
Ghost of a father is scratching his name in the muddy bank
Of a river, his son's, a pair of crow feet. Somewhere the

Rest are following his lead. We can't call them dead. I can't
Say I ever loved you more than now. I can't say I ever will.
I can't say. But I will pray. I will pray with him and I will
Pray for you. I was looking for you as the barn was burning.

I had a new birth in those ashes like rain. And when I cut
The first hole through your pocket watch it felt a little like
Murder. I was holding the chain. I thought I'd stay. I thought
I killed you that day. The second wasn't much easier. It took

Three years to pull the metal from my thumb. The third
Went down like whiskey. I was home again. I was home
Three times before I saw your ghost on the front page of
The paper, less than a ghost. We stayed in the mountains,

Built a fire, and thought we'd sing all night. We were
Drunk, Daddy. And a half-love drunk runs its course.
We don't speak anymore. She left and I drank, she
Drank me back into the golden era of regret, drank me

Away from you and me, about the age I burned the barn
I was leaving, she was leaving too; Adam was gone.
And when I left the ashes' side someone asked me— who?
I said it wasn't me this time; it was you.

All grew silent, and
You forgave me. And
I forgave you. This it Daddy-O.
Our war is through.

[The phone was ringing but he didn't hear it]

The dream was near done.

But before he went to the H & H funeral home to see him for the last time, he said he dreamed he washed his skin in the river bleeding from apple-thorn wounds.

He said he dreamed that he finally understood what his daddy told him about hurting, hills and hollows, love and forgiveness, love and pride, and compassion (and most of all to exude these in silence).

He said he dreamed his way back to sitting on his daddy's knee, as Merel Gene ran perfectly through every voice in every tale he ever told.

He stood up tall with his shoulders back beside his father's solid oak casket. He looked down into his father's face and said, "When you had your mind and it was just me, momma, you, Adam and Maggie Jane, I'd climb up on your lap when it was my turn— I knew that you knew, so I said, 'your call Daddy-o, any story of anyone's life will do. Any life will do.'

So, now when they ask Danny Boy when the last time was that he seen his daddy, he says, "About an hour before

we took his body to the Old Pine River. He was telling me a story I'd never heard before."

Daniel woke to the sound of a bisque-almond motel phone ringing, threw back the curtains, and thought, *if folks have to pass on, they ought to go down on a day like this and rinse their bodies in the river. They ought to give their bodies back clean as river water.*

PARADE

GRAND MARSHALL CALHOUN, DIRECTOR of the Taylor Lodge #113 near the square, turned to Morton Taylor, oldest of the town Elders still driving a hot-rod, and half-whispered a question in his ear:

"Mort, you get your aid this month? Somebody up on the hill is lining the pockets fuller, ain't they? You damn right they are. They're crooked as them big federal business crooks. It's been happening for years, they tell me. Like Daddy always said it would. Damn right it has. Reckon when somebody'll plumb starve to death, or die of the Sugar 'cause they can't eat right, when they ain't got no more in savings? Gone to the war effort most likely, and them boys won't ever be right again. The girls either. And folks'll get to turnin on their own kin and their own old friends tryin to survive, 'cause they're fighting for aid too, and liable to plumb quit talking to everybody in town. Clam-up and die alone at sundown or in the middle of a war, at home or elsewhere far away from home, some early

morning, perhaps out in the wild like the elders of the lost tribes they…"

Mort interrupts, "I wish you'd quit talkin about it. Let's just quit talking about it and enjoy this celebration. I'm here. I had a big breakfast. It's gonna be a good day. It's Old Timers Day. Hell Cal, it wouldn't bother me none if I croaked over in the middle of this here parade, so long as I put on a good show for the kids, and don't hurt nobody's feelings, or run over your old cantankerous brother-in-law or any of his old friends down at The Branch Home for the Aged and Infirm. Haha, I'm kiddin. I'm just kiddin Cal. That ain't gonna happen to me or them. At our age we won't get many more. Got to laugh in times like these, take advantage of the freedoms of the body and mind. And I ain't ever missed a one; so I'm goin to enjoy it, if you'll quit worryin me to death over it."

[A whistle a distance away]

"Not Yet, Mort. You anxious? We ain't to start till the third whistle blows."

"Hell, I thought that was three…? I'm just fired-up today. That's all, Cal."

"That's alright. You've listened to me and my complaining. It ain't the first time you ain't watched from the square, you old dog you. But if you get any older, you'll be watchin from The Olive Branch, with Buster and the slip-

ping-minds crew… hahaha," a dry forced hack-cackle of a laugh.

[Another whistle sounded]

11:54 a.m. ***The Parade***— (looping double, nearly, the quarter-mile six-lane, chunked and splitting asphalt track around the high school athletic field, lettered and finely kept by The Admiral, running impatiently still and doubled, nearly back around the official competition length where, normally, athletes and exercisers dash, pant, and dash again with or without the bleachers filled, with or without an audience, now filled precisely with sections within sections, regiments in orderly fashion, the annals of indispensable sections in the 110th Annual River Grove Old Timers Day Parade, held every year for over a century now)— was about to start.

According to the official bill in order of appearance: 12 noon: Police escort, American Flag, Grand Marshall, Percussion Section #1, Heritage Theme Floats, Baton Twirlers ages 8-12, Rifle Throwers ages 1315, Flag Carriers ages 16-18, Fire Department, Nature Theme Floats, Elder Theme Floats, Wind Section #1, Revolutionary Sons & Daughters Coalition, Tigers Club, Percussion Section #2, Cheerleaders youth and younger, Wilderness Scout Boys Troop 437 a & b, Junior High Cheer-spirit Club, Youth Theme Floats, Brass Section #1, Girl Squad Troop 183,

Luber Lodge Members, Retired Farmers Corp, Imagination Theme Floats, Hot Rods and Muscle Cars, History Theme Floats, Wind Section #2, Dancers & Ribbon Twirlers, Little League Ball Teams, Army Reserve Troops, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Junior Civil Club, Future Politicians' Convertible Fleet, Current & Future & Past Beauty Queens, Adorable Wives Association, Good Husbands Brigade, Brass Section #2, Mimes/Clowns, Adoptable Pets, Candy Throwers, Future Business Brothers Union, Church Sponsored Floats, Percussion Section #3, Wind Section #3, Brass Section #3, Riders on Horseback, Mules & Asses, Clowns on a miniature train caboose, and finally the Firework Grand Finale shot from the last float as it makes its way around Haddox Square and pauses. That final float, of course, always a Future Theme.

11:55 a.m. Shouting commands, Mr. Pete Peeler III the Parade Coordinator began directing the show, "line up on the x-marks; reach out and establish an arm-reach distance between you and the nearest person or decorative parade object to you. Touch them if you have to. STOP! The band for a moment!

"Is this thing on? Mic check. Mic check. Good morning everyone; I'd just like to go over a few things before we get started. Make sure to keep in time. Timing is everything. Presentation this year is of the utmost importance.

Everyone in town may be in attendance to shake hands with the veterans who returned home fifty years ago to the day, and honor the ones who didn't with a live performance of Taps. This will be especially emotional for everyone in attendance who has family fightin overseas in the current war, and those who've recently returned, and the families of those who haven't yet, and those that won't.

"As I'm sure you all know from times past, we will make our way silently observing the moment down Cardinal St, cross both Broad and Short Mountain in total silence, then head toward the center of town, resuming to play the fight song. From there, or nearly there, we will hit Main and proceed south (third movement in fight song in perfect time) where we will double back and begin circulating through the very heart of the people's congregation around Haddox Square, where every Grovian attending the parade will watch the finale, as the band begins to fade then rise softly in the background with the mentioned emotional music.

"If we time it properly, the notes will match the explosions of radiant-colored powder in the sky above us, the crowd and the music and the fire will all fall in silent unison just before the finale's finale, and the parade will flow into across and down each merchant's way, then round the square evenly up and down both parking sides, no beginnings or ends to speak of, as the parade will close

itself into itself.

"When the Heritage and Future Floats align themselves with the front south corners of the square, we will know our timing is right. When silence falls as we come to a halt, before it rises again, no end or beginning in sight, indistinguishable, we will know. We will be right on the money, so to speak.

"The fireworks will be set near sun-down, to those in the parade it will seem half the procession is heading in as the other half is heading out; the onlookers make no such distinctions, now that the parade has closed the circle it set out to close somewhere beginning around high noon, the time it commenced. And for a brief shining moment during the finale, as everyone is staring into the sky together, the floats will run parallel with one another. Away from and toward the others, each with the other, they will align— The Heritage with The Future, The Youth with The Elder, The Church with The Nature, The History with The Imagination— as they always have.

"Once our finale has reached its finale, the finale of the 110th annual Old Timers Parade, but not the parade's final finale (there will be finales to come) we will realign and head back to where it all began. Let's hope there isn't a delay; but if there is, we will take it in stride and keep the parade going…"

[A third whistle a distance away]

11:58 a.m. Mort pressed the clutch, hit the gas, the engine squealed, a backfire of flames, burnt petroleum hanged on the humid air. The stick was loose in its position. He sat motionless, revved in neutral, hypnotized by the back roar of the engine, the cylinders in revolution, a half-smile across his face, thinking about the faces of the young folks he would entertain at the parade today. Thinking about all the times he had been to that parade, entertaining or watching, and other parades too, all the way back to when he was a boy, the 50th Annual, maybe his first, maybe his second, it wasn't important then, which number it was, he thought, and he remembered all the people who he knew that had been born since then and before, some on parade day, others not, but born just the same, and then of all those who had died since and before, some on the same corner in the same parade where he thought he could remember seeing his first person who'd died— Cardinal and Main, Old Timers Day. Others he thought of in hospitals and nursing homes, dying but not dead, some as visitors wide-awake atop beds in the guest bedroom of a loved one, dying not yet dead, some laughing at home in the last stages of dreaming, but not, some on the front page of The Herald, not dead but dying, some in the streets, some in fields or deep woods, some on the last day of their 95th spring in River Grove,

some near the end of autumn barely able to breathe without mechanical assistance. All dying together. Some in winter, some in the womb, some summer, some spring, some in vain, others in ceaseless joy, all of them together. Dying, but not dead.

Mort considered life as a parade and vice versa, as he was pushing the stick into first position, gears moving together smooth as dusk falls in the Southern forest, blending shade with sharp light, life with life & death. If one could ever consider all the lives and all the deaths that River Grove could ever know, even those that haven't happened yet, and he thought (perhaps for the first time, perhaps not, but like it was the first time just the same), *'this is it.'*

Mort knew, simple and thorough, addressing himself as he would the others, affirming again what he'd already mentioned to Cal, *'This will be my last parade, here in this seat. We all ought to be so lucky, Cal, to count ourselves among the lucky ones, the ones who've never missed this parade, always here in memory, even after we've been long gone for decades, after our children and their children have passed on, sins washed clean away to some wide slow-movin river, victories celebrated, defeats accepted, aid restored to the needy— when we are just names in some old story told over dinner, local tales of everyday people in some ol' part of this ol' world, loving or not. No epics or heroics today. Maybe a song or two, maybe not. And that's that. The way it ought to be. And I got a*

little something in store for this parade, since I'm getting older than the hills and can barely shift gears anyway, and it could very well be my last, in the hot-rod seat or out, I'm going to let it all loose. Let the machine do the talking, let go of the reins you might say, let life take over. Yep. Gonna give these kids the best show they've ever seen at this one. Something to talk all year about. Then call it quits, watch from now on from the sidewalk, maybe out the diner window. Yes'ir, I'm gonna do just that…' his thoughts trailing off, considering only briefly if at all that the parade may have something in store for him.

Mort, not forgetting the fact (just overlooking it) that history is prone to repetition, had made last minute adjustments to his hot rod coupe deville. Winning the Colonel's Car Club Old Timers Best in Show was his only agenda.

"Folks have died in this parade before." Cal said.

"Me? My turn?' Everyday people are born, Cal. And others have a big pancake breakfast. I've already had mine.' Everyday people die at the diner table or out in public. So what? Everyday, Cal..."

"Wait and see. Everyday people do the things people do"

'*Everyday, somewhere...*' Mort thought. *'People gather together along the avenues of a town to wait, knowing full and well what life is capable of— war, death too soon, life too early, enemies friends and family, children becoming life-long friends or lovers and making lives of their own, folks dying young and folks getting old together,*

suffering and celebrating together, whatever together— and they go just the same, to watch it pass them by. Together.

'Everyday, somewhere in the world, a parade is about to begin. And it has.'

11:59.57 a.m. "Now then," Mr. Pete shouted through the megaphone, "let's don't delay! When the clock hits noon, let's start this ***PARADE***. A'one and a'two and a'…"

6

The Apologies

1-22

[SB 09-83/5-7]

HL.SA.09143.E

1

DEAR MY DAVID L WRIGHT,

Since you're the new guy in the office (and it is a tradition) we're going to have to publish this under your name. There's really no other choice. Blame it all on you if it doesn't generate the sales revenue that we are initially hoping for. So, get ready. 'Cause everybody has to take one for the team at least once when they first start. Plus it's always funny to watch Reed get fake-pissed at the new guy for writing something like that, or this.

2

DEAR MY NARRATOR,

I have no clue who you are— if you even exist. Like the whole web of distinct interactive voices is your voice, yours is anonymous and activated only when the reader becomes lost in mid-thought or breaks the rhythm of the page. So they ask who's speaking and what the heck are they talking about? But I hear it, the question-answer, though it's still out of ear-sight even now. Still won't recognize it when it's here, loud and clear, before it's completely gone. That it is: sight, taste, smell, touch, music. Things narrator. All your devices, keen and un-keen. It's as though we haven't met yet. Like the ice-cream truck three blocks over, I can only barely hear you when I become distracted, like the sound of your voice is coming from around the corner and I have no time to stop and listen, see if I can recognize your sound with having to look for you or pass you on the sidewalk. But if we do pass each other, you and me (the ice-cream truck by my block with

my friends in their front yards already waiting), when we round the corners headed toward the coming sounds of sweetness, we must do so as children first sharing ice-cream a few blocks from home. Otherwise we'll never let ourselves forgive one another for intruding upon each other's thoughts, throw each other out of rhythm for the first time. If it happens again when we've grown and moved far away from one another, out of sound range, we'll pass silently the other (the others we are) on the sidewalk after work, or at a parade. Most likely we'll believe we've met before. So we'll turn back, shake hands in passing, and say nice to meet you just the same. If it happens again the week after, things may happen differently, we may come from different directions or the same, we may have to go out of our way to get around a trash heap or mailbox to accidentally by chance come close enough to meet one another, but we'll pass each other just the same, silently. You me and me and me and you and you and you. Just a collective effort of individual names. Most likely the way it's always been. I don't mind not knowing you. The names do the talking for you. They create you so I don't have to.

3

DEAR MY MITCH,

Thanks for helping me move, and thanks for being late for dinner with your family. Thanks for reading the notes, the transcripts of the tapes, the early drafts, all of it. Thanks for listening to my stories about all those would-be worlds.

4

DEAR MY MITCH'S FUTURE offspring, and their future offspring, and theirs and mine,

Thanks for listening to Mitch and me retell ***PARADE***. I know how he can repeat himself sometimes, as can I. But thanks for sticking with him when he did, and me too.

5

DEAR MY DR. MIKHAIL LEHAM BURGDOCK,

Thanks for crying in class and teaching us that the past and future are deaf as door nails, but worth talking to just the same. I get it now. They're deaf. We talk to them. We talk to our selves through them. R.I.P my good man. I hope you finally got to shake hands with Owen Warland and The Three Billy's, like you always knew you would.

6

DEAR MY OTIS,

Thanks for letting me use you to guide my Little Lost Boy into thinking about the wars of his generation. Until then, he had only thought of war as a thing of the past, a thing that ate away at his father's heart for almost four decades. He never saw it as a thing to come, or a thing that just always is. Until then, he didn't realize that he was in the middle of his own war, even as he knew someone was pulling the trigger and pointing the barrel aimed at another boy who didn't know he was in a war either. You too, like your partners at the bar, are an idea. Not a character. Thank you for not wanting to be anything more.

7

DEAR MY THELMA,

I can only assume… since I didn't order any myself (because it was breakfast at the time I wrote you and threw you into the box)… that your fried chicken is wonderful. Thank you for letting me use your place, your Lunch Box diner, as the setting for a portion of this story that never got written. If I ever write myself into the Greater Oakton area again on a business trip, I'll stop in and say hello and have some of your Dixie Eggs, even though I know you're not there anymore.

8

DEAR MY THELMA'S FRIENDS: Ernie, William Ray, Tom Cat & the Old Man at the end of the bar,

You fellows really ought to get your stories straight. Well, that's not entirely your fault, I suppose. Mostly mine really, for not being able to keep up and keep it all straight in my head. If you think I've misquoted you at all in any of my work, please feel free to email me or give me a call, or contact the publishers and they'll handle it. My number and addresses are at the bottom of this letter. I sincerely appreciate your help, even though I had to change some of the details of the events… which I may have already gotten wrong to begin with… to accommodate for page space and column length. No room for overhead in this market. You understand.

9

DEAR MY ALICE MCARTRY, the McArtry Sisters, Johnny Wayne & his Late Wife,

Alice, I'm sorry I made you on paper seem like a sad little girl who tried filling the voids in her life by laying with a bunch of boys who didn't love her, when all she wanted was to be Loved. It's embarrassing to think that I could think about a young lady thinking that way. I know you are probably much different than I made you seem in the story. There were happy times, and fun times, and play times, and nap times, and book times, and dad times, and sister times, and learning times, and quiet times that no one will ever get to see— because I myself, the author's co-author's author, overlooked them. I hope they (the readers) won't think less of you. I hope they know that you're fully fleshed out, somewhere. I hope they know right from the beginning. Because I never did, until now. If I could tell the readers one thing about you, it would be that I am sure I am wrong about you. Because no one can really

know a person. The closest we could come would be to spend a lifetime together with another in silence. But still that wouldn't be enough knowing to really know someone. And you know what that means: for all the people we really ought to know, we can't even know ourselves. Slaving away alone in a quiet room in the dark without any voices swirling around rarely ends in silence, rarely brings us any closer to who we are meant to be, no matter how many times and ways we try to balance the equation, no sights + no sounds = nonsilence. Always a remainder. There's still that one puny sound, even if it's what we call in numeric terms the value 0; and with all its different voices on mute, a lost integer of a faltering voice comes between us and the silence we crave. The static we could still hear. I'm sorry I made you seem like static: so confused and flattened out across the page… like strange thin frozen sheets stretched over a twin futon mattress, cold-flat, only room enough for one to reach half-comfortably that forth stage of sleep. In the cycle of to wake and to sleep, a pure and total rejuvenation can only be found in the hush. In the beginning there was silence, and it was everything. Then came the noise. If I could return back to square one, that primitive Omega-like silence, the sum of all advanced copulating species, I'd tell it all. Your whole life in retrospect. I'm sorry the only thing I told the readers about your character (the term being used here in the moral

sense of the word, as in 'she had a wholesome character about her') was about how your sisters' vices got them into a world of experience. And I'm sorry I made it seem romantic and beneficial to their learning curve when I contrasted their fates with your own seemingly desperate vice of nulling and voiding yourself under the bodies of an ever-morphing stranger. It was unfair to them and it was unfair to you. And I don't know what came over me when I told them that Lily died young… as if to add insult to your injuries but not push the story forward one bit. How much grief could I put you all through to arrive at my own desirable place? I can't even answer that here. But I am so sorry for it. And I don't even know why I did it.

Johnny Wayne. What more can I say? I killed off your wife and your third daughter. I turned your eldest two into pseudo-romantic examples of teenage innocence. I made Alice seem loose with her body; let her give in to the lust of the stranger: her coping mechanism for growing up without a mother. How could you ever forgive me for something like that? You couldn't, or shouldn't. I knew that, or do now. And out of an act of cowardice desperation on my part, not knowing where else to turn, I made you kill yourself too, like my dad did, so that I wouldn't have to face you man-to-man (like he would've had to me) and answer for the things I'd done to your family. I made you kill yourself because I didn't know what else to do

with you. I sure couldn't face you. Neither could he face me… if he were given that chance in death.

Mrs. McArtry, ma'am, I'm sorry your youngest daughter had to grow up without a mother. I'm truly sorry for the things I've put your family through.

10

DEAR MY ALICE SAGE,

I'd hoped to make good for what I'd done to you and your family, what I said about them, and what I wrote about them to meet my own needs, by giving you a little family of your own. A handsome husband and a healthy blue-eyed boy. A little house too. But that, too, nearly all failed. Somehow Harold Sage became something I never saw coming. I thought at first that he had come from a good family, and he did. I was right. Then I thought he'd turn out like his father, and he looked like he was going to. But what happened next caught me by surprise. Harold's father died unexpectedly, never fully raising Harold into manhood, and he turned to drugs and alcohol to erase the memory of it. I never expected that he'd be the one stranger you'd meet last and fall in love with. I had another handsome boy from a good family in River Grove written for you at first, but he is nowhere to be found here… I won't even mention his name and force upon him the sad-

ness of knowing what might have been… that he could have been Mr. Alice McArtry, and not whoever he is without you. Everything just happened all at once, before I realized what was going on in front of my very eyes, like I wasn't seeing it at all at first. In the blur of the moment I was writing it blind. You were on your way to the Meadow Lark to give birth to a boy I'd write you to name Elmer, that you did name Elmer in real life. And I was blind to the fact that Harry had forgotten it was parade day when he rushed you to your labor of solitude and had to swerve to avoid killing someone in the band. And when he did it, swerved to miss the conductor and hit the curb, I was blind to the fact that it would jar that blood clot loose. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry i'm sorry imsorry. Forgive me? Don't answer. For I knew not what I was doing. I didn't know Harry hadn't been to the doctor in years, and that his veins had rapidly been filling up with the vices of life since his father died. My goodness… but what I've done I've done. What have I done?

No undoing that now. So I'll press on in your name, and theirs. I wish I could hear your voice just once more. I wish the crowd noise would settle so I could find you again. Where are you now, Alice? I was done with you prematurely, and never noticed until now, at the end of my life, that I should have let you speak for yourself. And so I must apologize for it too. My life. But that isn't your fault;

it's mine. But I did what I could do with what I had at the time. Elmer was born healthy. That's the best I could do, best I could offer. The child and the mother were both healthy; I reported it like it happened.
And it seemed at first all was well.

But then the father (not the son as I had anticipated) was dead upon arrival… leaving a whole unfinished life behind. Events already written were in progress which depended upon his living to be an old man to flesh his story out fully. Elmer came unexpectedly early and you loved him like only a widowed mother could. And that's how you taught me forgiveness. You showed me a mother's love and I knew right away how the story would end. It wouldn't. That's how you taught me that this story, ya'll's story, can never properly end as long as I keep trying to pen/pin it down, keep making all this racket.

At the end of our lives we can only happily apologize for not doing a better job with it, not finishing what we started out to finish— all the while knowing that it's okay that there is still work to be done. Thank you for teaching me that not everyone in the story has to die a tragic death just because the true-life person they were based on died tragically and got shoved into a box too early, a story of their own, so everyone could relive their death in private just as they did. What a miserable way to spend our time, writing and reading a story like that. What a noise. Thank

you for teaching me this is not an end result, but a means for continuing the traditions the parade preserves. Maybe I'll learn one day: That more people can be born there too, like Elmer. People that you didn't see coming when the whole thing began. People like Elmer, conceived by the story alone but as alive as anyone. For that reason he may very well be the only one who ever lives there and never grows up in his heart, because this book ends and he's still a boy in his mind. His body may age but he'll never die in the pages of this story. Or any other that I know of, like his author's co-author's author may, while he is sitting old at a cedar desk by himself writing you an apology… hoping that you've already forgiven him somehow. He could well die happily alone or surrounded by his closest family and friends. Even his children. And it wouldn't matter then, because the end is too late in any story for an apology to do any good. They'll (the readers or listeners) no doubt see it as a fraud, a last ditch effort to make the whole of it all (the effort to tell the story) seem worth it. So I begin here, after the story is over, to get my apologies out of the way. That's why this story, this new story which you haven't heard yet, begins with an apology. So that the reader may see the effort is sincere… and keep reading the stories. And for that, Elmer Sage's life will be spared. He'll grow old in life in the book, but not in heart— he will be born, again, in the story, again and again, but grow young-

er everyday in life outside this book. Only the story could take his life without first leaving him on the brink of an elderly war. Not his author. I'm not his god. And so Elmer Sage, your only son, will never die in this story. I promise. It's the least I can do.

11

DEAR MY ELMER SAGE,

[The author knows that this Elmer isn't real, because he isn't based on anyone in the author's real life. There is someone from River Grove named Elmer Sage, but he is far different than I have portrayed him. I merely borrowed a name. He was added in to fill the logical gap that real life sometimes leaves in a narrative, whether by coincidence or omnipotent design. Think of your story. Have you been somewhere and unexpectedly met someone and thought of that person for the rest of your life, but never saw them again? Where do they fit into your time and place, your story? What gap do they leave? Or fill?

For once the author had nothing to apologize for. The story did, does. The story has injected itself into Elmer's fictional life, and now it has/had a responsibility to Elmer and to the others too. Since, upon the birth of Elmer the story had been thrust into the role of parent, even though the others were orphans from another story, not born be-

tween the covers of the book where Elmer Sage had been, was said to have been. And it never forced on him (or them) an unwarranted beg for forgiveness, especially for something they hadn't done, yet. They became the story's children too. And by the end, the author, no matter what was thought, had no control over anything that was happening; it did. All of this has been done before. And the story knew what to do all along, the author supposes. It's done this before. The author and the story have completed their work together, here and now, the little work they did together. Right now. At the end of these sentences, the story… against all the author's earlier wishes (he/she need say nothing now, he/she has made his/her peace)… will apologize for not telling its author what it was about until the very end, finish the work it had done alone, go silent. Author and story finished quietly together, requiring both to remain silent, without the reader. The reader's work is never caught up, never finished, always trying to strike a balance between two disparate acts of violence or inaction on the author's part, always the negotiator in the war between the writer and the author, the author and the word, the word and the sentence, the sentence and the page, the page and the chapter, the chapter and the story, the story and the life, the life and the lives to come. Elmer's role is the ideal reader I suppose, a trait he learns from his mother. The reader is always writing and re-writing what the au-

thor and story never will, rendering the final motion: the creation of silence …[…]…

12

DEAR MY PROPHET MAN,

I always thought in the beginning you were the hero of the story. Right from the start, I just knew it would be you who saved whatever or whoever it was that was in dire need of saving. Who else could do such a thing in a story like this, other than a character named Prophet Man? A superhero name. A man you could see into the future with. I was always wrong, though. After seeing what you did to Alice and Elmer, I can't imagine how you could see anything coming, other than happy hour at The Maude. I don't owe you an apology, you do. And to Maude. You had an open tab when you died. Elmer paid it. You owe your only son… $56.17 for the 'good-time' you left him.

13

DEAR MY REED C BOHANON,

Thanks for being an asshole. I always wanted to write your version of Lonnie Edwards, me, to say that. I know you've created your own version of me, but let me be the first to assure you you're wrong about me. The night after I caught you drinking in the parking lot after the LAFA meeting I knew who you really were, and who I wanted Lonnie Edwards, me, to be. And since he, me, doesn't work for you anymore, now I can. Lonnie says, "I quit Reed. Find someone else to go cover the American South. Asshole." Asshole.

14

DEAR MY REED C BOHANAN'S SECRETARY,

Under Lonnie's desk in a stash box in the copy office is a Zagnut candy bar. You are welcome to it. I know how you can't resist stuffing your face with edible coconutscented retail goods. Go ahead. Kill two birds with one stone. Go ahead.

15

DEAR MY LONNIE'S MOM,

Thank you for the books you showed Lonnie how to read as a child, especially the three you gave him on his nineteenth birthday, the last ones of all the many before you died. The Billys. Billy Shakespeare, Billy Blake, and Billy Faulkner.

16

DEAR MY HADDOX SQUARE,

I strolled around you, between your buildings and your mirrored glass. I passed your people all through the middle of you. I brought young boys and girls home from war to march around you. I thought of you as the center piece of my little town, even though I considered writing you out of my River Grove all together once early on. I decided halfway against it later that night. Then, earlier that next morning, I fully realized that you couldn't age either; in the stories dwell the ageless. So in the course of less than twenty four hours, no matter how big the buildings around you got, or how many people redecorated your interior, it became endlessly evident in each facet of your life that you'd always be square, without beginning or end, like a circle. A town square is just like a circle, just more rigid… like four rays reluctantly agreeing to become one bright incandescent plum of light, some kind of bright iridescence in the center of River Grove.

The fireworks are still lovely above you. You've done nothing wrong in staying put to look into the sky above you. There is sky above you. We, I, brought our wars to you when they were over. We celebrated the elder survivors and played Taps for the young dead. If you had wars of your own you were fighting, they are always yours inside you. You never let them show. You always welcomed the ones that people brought to show you. You comforted them when no one could help. You fought off the bright lights of the city as long as your citizens needed you to… so, their story could unfold on one particular weekend, in the historic township of River Grove. So, they could die peacefully at home. So, rest assured that not a single person will ever die in vain in your war, except you. And you won't completely die either. Your story will endure. Stay young and on the move. I couldn't ask anything more from you, nothing other than: can I help you find a way to ease the pain of your war? Save you from the inevitable progress of Greater Oakton?

17

DEAR MY RIVER GROVE,

You're a made-up town in a book of made-up things. You were my narrative place-name where I could pull every trick in the book. Your fate was one dictated by a strange tradition, The Festival of Fools turned Lying Contest, and geography and humidity. You had to be written by a river in the American South. And so it was. I drew a star by a river on a topographical map without boundaries or state markers in the lower Appalachian region, only rises and falls in the land, undulations of a dying mountain never dead, twists of rivers and juts of shoals, the caked mud of creek banks and the cottonwoods, no boundaries, and I turned that map upside down, closed my eyes, held the map in front of me, opened them once briefly to find the little box and open it, closed them again, removed what I was looking for in the box, struck it on its side, burned the map in my hands and let it singe my palms, drip thin feral mercury-

colored ink on my fingers, and I swallowed the ashes from the map and went to sleep. That way, if anyone were to ask later what state you were in, I could honesty say I don't know for sure. If they find you by chance, it'll have nothing to do with me. It will be because you'll have found them, and I'll have no need to apologize for your disappearance anymore. I'll have no need to apologize for your being a work of fiction.

18

DEAR MY SARAH BELLE MCALISTER,

Thank you for dinner… and the Adam-colored wild flowers on top of Big Brotherton Mountain.

19

DEAR MY DANIEL MCALISTER,

I'll start this thing (this story) over right now if you'll promise me you'll go see your daddy before he dies. My only goal was to have the two of you reconciled by the end. If you never respond, I'll know that you said no. That those kinds of narratives won't do any of us a bit of good now, and that I should know better than to ask you to think about what might have been in the book about lost friends and lost love. Had you not stop talking to your father, Merel Gene McAlister, the un-hero of this un-heroic unwritten tale, I'd have no need to apologize to anyone. If you never respond, I'll know that you said 'no' because you know you'd better learn the hard way, you better learn. If you never respond, I'll know that you and I have reached a mutual agreement with your father, I'll go my separate way, the two of you will agree to meet elsewhere and reconcile your differences, you'll cross the desert to meet his father, and the three of you will reach a mutual

agreement with his father, you'll go your separate way, and the three of them will agree to meet elsewhere to reconcile their differences with their fathers, and so on. If you never respond, I'll know that you have reconciled your differences, and went your own way.

20

DEAR MY MEREL GENE MCALISTER,

Your wife was a wonderful lady. Some ladies naturally are. Others not so much. But what man can ever be wonderful without some wonderful woman to kick him in the ass and teach him to be wonderful? I once knew a man just like you. His favorite song was "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain" by Willie Nelson. We played it at his funeral by the river at his last request. From him I learned valuable lessons.

But like all family members and all friends in the world, I knew only of him what he would let me know of him. And I knew all of that well then. Different over time. Not so well. So what those lessons mean now, I'm not even sure. I knew him like I knew you. Your name came to me at work one day, because I have a friend whose name is the same as yours, but he spells it differently. Merrell.

And since he isn't you, and I'm not sure how you would have spelled it anyway, I dropped one R and one L, assum-

ing this would do, to cover up whoever you're (to be) revealed to be. Because when said aloud (Merel, Merrell, Merrel, or Merrel) no one can tell which way you spell yours, so I figured no one would notice the difference between my Merel Gene and the real one. Because they never see you write your name in this book anyway, only me. And I could be wrong about you, about the spelling. The writing. Not the saying. Or I could be right about me.

I'd like to take this opportunity to apologize to you too, for making Mort Taylor's car run you over on Main St. Honestly, I never saw it coming either. I wasn't there… so can't prove any of this, but I heard tell of it in a similar way. I am with you in the story, you know, when the car comes down on you. Surprised like you. You're spirit (so to speak) watching you, my body, you, and me. I knew you were going to die, but I had other plans. And then it happened.

I turned away to some other thought for just a second, a piece of toast or a Dixie Egg, literally just a sliver into an aside, then I turned back to your side to think of you, and you were lying there on Main St in the middle of the parade, the pool of blood around you uniformly growing wider, soaking into the pavement, becoming itself a dim glow blacker than the pavement around your paper thin body. What had I done? But that's what they said. You died that day I was turned away.

You weren't there for me to kill off anymore, the way I had planned in the beginning. No more ace in the hole. Nothing in the narrative to fall back on. Now what was I going to do? Improvisation is all I had. I didn't know what to say.

I wrote you into your overalls.

I wrote you out the door of The Olive Branch.

I wrote you going to the parade.

I wrote you walking into the street for a better view, to try and see Daniel maybe.

I wrote the parade coming too quickly for me to notice too. It was the speed of the parade that threw the whole thing off.

I wrote Mort's hot-rod coming down the street too fast.

I wrote you out into the street too long.

I wrote it hitting you before he could stop it, and I didn't know what else to say. ***PARADE*** had killed you.

I Wrote you hitting the pavement.

Wrote blood black as the blood in the black pavement around your body.

Wrote it radiating dimly, black blood drying in the street.

Wrote that I heard all this when I was turned away, looking in some other direction, looking for what never was meant to happen, supposing it would either way, me

looking or not. I didn't know what else to say.

So, I lied to write, I wrote it— and when I did, I missed it.

I was the one, like everybody that day, who didn't see a thing. It's obvious in its tone shift. Read it again. Like a missing cylinder in a hotrod. Hear it?

I told everyone that I knew exactly what happened, gave them the illusion that I was in control, and no one else saw it, exactly, either. So they believed me. So, I thought. And so that became the device I needed to explain your death, and why it happened the way it happened. Two lies about two other lies, told while looking for lies to tell the truth.

I made everyone lie and say they didn't, 'I didn't lie,' about seeing a'thing.

I made everyone's head turn.

I made everyone lie about what they hadn't or had seen. Wasn't sure of.

I lured their attention into a lie, all their heads being turned at once, and at once watching what was to come in the parade, instead of what was happening right in front of them.

Then I wrote not a lie, the only truth I told about you then, in that draft, that you were a good man with demons in his past. I said it just like that.

What else was I suppose to say? Not me? I didn't do it?

I knew at first it was an accident that I caused, but then it was me, it came true.

I caused it. I caused it. I caused it.

I was turned away from the page, me, and accidentally wrote everything to fast and too far away. Like I'm doing here. The parade. You. The car.

I wrote that the aid checks quit coming and the old folks began to worry.

I had to improvise. I'm sorry for taking the aid away, or writing the aid away, and leading everyone on like I did. Because I wrote that people really had seen what happened, later in the story, and so I am lying when I write about the lie that they didn't see a-thing, and I wrote them into lying that lie, too.

Basically everything can be linked back to me. The aid leaving. The lies. The deaths. The estrangements. The uncertainties. The Sunday dinners I missed telling lies. The hangovers. The drugs. The alcohol. The fathers dying in the streets. The fathers hanging from tree limbs. The fathers strapping bombs to the chests of their sons. The fathers that went away to war. The fathers suspicious of their sons and daughters at home alone, after they come back from war. The vices. The redemptions. The voices. The resurrections. The love that never happened. All of it. All back to me.

This is my book. This is my book. This is my book.

And it's not my story. I won't take responsibility for what happens to the children.

I will in time, but not now. It's mine. I wrote it, but I didn't have any part in putting that plan into action. That's up to the parents (the real teachers of school children). I was just a boy myself, you'll remember, in this story. Sorry to say it so obvious.

That's the truth, Merel Gene. You're life was in the hands of a distracted kid. That's why he's apologizing first now before he starts again, at the end of his life.

I wish I could know how you feel about all this, if you're mad at me for not spending enough time with you when you were younger and healthy. Not giving a full detailed account of your life's history. I'm sorry I didn't give the readers a clear sense of your character. I never knew myself, like I was the one with dementia and you knew exactly who and where you were all along.

Maybe you didn't die in ***PARADE*** after all. Maybe I did. But that's not true either, because you were sick, and your mind was slipping away from your body. And I know they said you died after being hit by the hot rod, so it must be… I never considered what the narrative would've been like had you survived the accident.

If I had it to do all over again, I wouldn't interfere with your life. Or his. Or any of theirs. I'd never stop at Thelma's. I'd keep on driving. Go back to the city, back

through the toll booths, back through myths and times and places not my own, and back to life on the 11th floor of an electric high rise. The one I left so long ago. I'd never go back to River Grove again for him. I'd start fresh as myself, and only myself. Not this Mr. Lon Edwards fellow. Just Lonnie. Me. Enough with this half-memoir-half-novel business. I'll never be left with a whole story. And our time is nearly up.

That's another reason I'm apologizing: in hopes the story will finish itself, the story tell itself. I'm finished. It finished me. I can't, maybe no one can, finish any story ever told. They (the stories) can only be abandoned from physical exhaustion. We're all just words left behind. Just collected fragments of someone else's story, and how they walked through the lives of people not unlike themselves.

I need to thank you for how much you've helped me, even though I kept insisting Mort's car run you over in the parade, and made everyone believe you walk in front of it on purpose. Thank you for how much patience you had with me, what little time we spent together, while I was up for days on end thinking about how the plot would have to weave so I could have you killed on Main Street, cement the 'American Dream' metaphor…

How could I logically get to that place without employing some device like a time machine, a rupture in the time-space continuum, or an unknown assassin, perhaps the

long lost master key found? Each would need a history I'm not fit to tell. History isn't ours to pin down, or pen down. I know that now.

I hope that everyone sees that you either had a choice in your death or you didn't. Either way it's my fault, which means either way you lived until it happened upon you unexpectedly, death, and so lived a life worth talking about. As if that alone would somehow make me feel better about living my own life, slaving over battle plans for a war against my own unborn children.

I wrote your death quick and early and without hesitation. It was an accident. And when it happened I was looking away.

But now I know yours best. It was hard to take a good long look at you dying in the street. Looking away for all those years, that was the easiest part. Almost fun, looking back. It was situating you and your death, what I'd done, together into a time and place that was all its own and so in rhythm with the world I'd created that it would prove me wrong, that was my biggest problem. I had to prove to myself that I never needed to tell this story.

Necessarily so, like the rest of my colleagues of the book, I'd be an absolute failure when dealing with the old sentiments of every good story, old proverbial lessons of the heart: life and death, here and there, then and now, what might have been and not, the grand narratives. It's

not that simple anymore.

Be nice if it were, I suppose. But then again, how? But then again where? And so on.

My world is a world of footnotes upon footnotes upon footnotes upon footnotes' footnotes, mixed with networks where private spaces eat way into public, fiction into nonfiction, revealing a rich ether glow where everyone watches life flat and fixed in place, and we aren't moving here, the globe is. Every single second of it. Every inch is suspended in liquid crystal display.

My earth is a flat earth moving, glowing in a box, a window overlooking a hallway between me and a grander body of knowledge. And to the best of my knowledge that body is just floating somewhere on the electric impulses of a super main frame, the biggest device, the box the grand narrative comes in, somewhere just over the horizon line. The grandest narrative they'll call it, no doubt, sinking with the sun.

Obvious, I suppose now. A web for all information about life. Not life. Not not life. And still you lived on. Another Earth between a sun and a moon.

Thanks for sticking with me while I tried to talk my way into thinking I had any control over what you did while you were outside the book and off the page. People had their way with you after you'd gone. Whatever happened in your days away from the page, I can't account

for. How can I ever determine mood across terrain and day without a camera fixed to your chest from birth? Even if that were the case it would take a lifetime to record your story. I guess I should have asked you all along— because I now know what you would have said, and now that I can't ask you word for word, a son-figure to a father-figure, what these symbols of the passing knowledge and understanding mean, 'what is a story, exactly?,'

(Dad, how am I suppose to talk to you and deal with the strain of not having a single guiding voice to direct me along into life outside of youth, life outside the box in the big full view of war efforts and funeral cars, how?)

Now that I can't ask, but have, and still do everyday and get the same answer (silence every time), I realize the truest answers to the big questions have always been the same …[…]… silent.

21

DEAR MY OBIT WRITER,

Write:

He lived and he died.

He is survived by his only son, Lonnie Edwards, II, his daughter-in-law, Shelby Mae, his only grandson, Lonnie Edwards, III, and his wife, Anna Leigh.

He wrote the obituary of every citizen of Haddox County for the last fifty-eight years of his life.

He was an angel donor to the Haddox Memorial Library Special Archives.

He won the Old Timers Day Lying Contest twenty-seven years in a row. By far more than any other person in the history of the event. By far.

Visitation with family and friends will be held on Sunday, May 19th at Hooper & Hall Funeral Home & Chapel.

Since he was lucky enough to die peacefully in his sleep at approximately 4:17 a.m. in the early morning

hours before the 168th Annual Old Timers Day Parade, he'd prefer that in lieu of flowers, donations be made in his name to *Disabled Veterans of America*.

"Y'all get me hearse with a luggage rack. I'm taking it all with me when I go."

22

DEAR MY EULOGIST, last but certainly not least,

Take the day off. I'll handle this one. They don't know what you look like or sound like; they'll never notice the difference: [clears throat and takes a half-serious scholarly-funeral tone]:

"The aim of his monumental effort seemed to be to gather together for close analysis the discontinuous ruins of a shattered common memory of the big event that happened during his lifetime and the time-scattered histories of that event and of River Grove, and observe them in the only two respects he felt they could rightfully be observed in: fixed-spatiality, in the physical sites of memory; and elusive-temporality, the continuous instability of significances between the two.

"He is on some other side now, crossed-over they say. The continuity of his performance collapsed on-stage inside the memory-theatre, he called it, and he was left to sift through the un-orderly files of his life late in life, the

old trace data of yesterday's news.

"The poor bastard was always late."

"You just missed it," The Old Man said. "Old Timers Day was last Saturday."

"Sorry I had to hear you say that. I pulled into River Grove after the parade had already ended. I guess the jokes on me."

Sincerely,
LE